THRILLING WESTERN

10¢

SEPT.

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

CIRCLE STAR TROUBLE
A Quick-Draw Action Novel
By TOM CURRY

•

VALLEY OF BLAZING GUNS
A Range War Novelette
By LARRY A. HARRIS

•

ALSO
G. A. WELLS

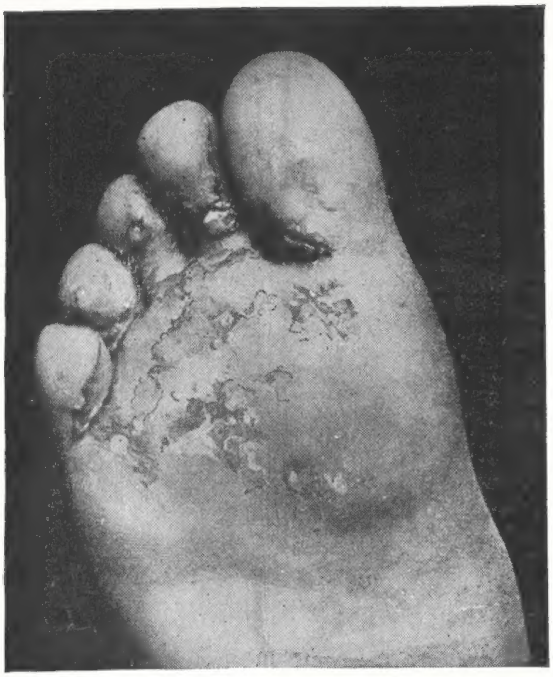
•

WILLIAM McCLELLAND

•

GRANT TAYLOR

GUN LAW FOR HOSS THIEVES
A Novelette of Western Justice
By LEE BOND



FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT

Send Coupon

Don't Pay Until Relieved

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

HERE'S HOW TO TREAT IT

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 20 minutes of boiling to kill the germ; so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the tissue of the skin where the germ breeds.

ITCHING STOPS IMMEDIATELY

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the treatment at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

GORE PRODUCTS, INC. **T. F.**

849 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a complete treatment for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1 If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

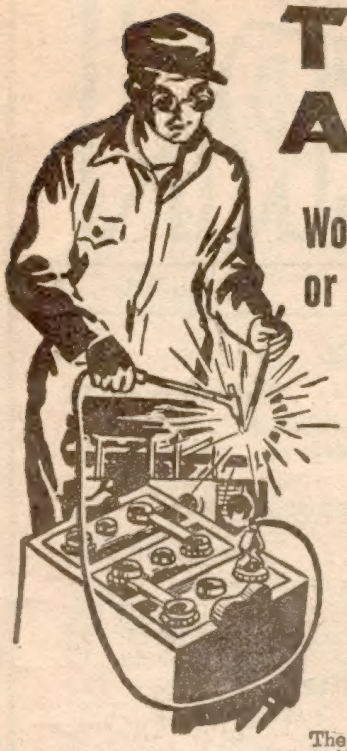
NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE .....

New 6-Volt TRINDL Electric ARC WELDER

PATENTS PENDING



Works on Storage Battery or 110 Volt Light Circuit

A REAL WELDER

RETAILS FOR 3.75 EA.

Men, here is the hottest specialty item that has come along in years. A real honest to goodness electric arc welder that does a man size job. Built sturdily of the finest materials. Requires no mechanical knowledge—any one can use it. Every demonstration should make a sale. This new Trindl Electric Arc Welder is made possible by the invention of a low voltage carbon which gets white hot from the current of an ordinary 6 volt storage battery such as in your automobile. It only uses about 20 to 25 amperes of current which is about the same current drain as 4 headlight bulbs, yet develops about 7000 degrees of heat.

MELTS IRON AND STEEL INSTANTLY

The Trindl Welder is simple to use. Expert welding can be done by anyone. The Trindl Arc Welder is the only battery welder that, after a rigid test, has been approved by the Automotive Test Laboratories of America. It is ideal for making permanent fender repairs—also for broken castings, radiators, cylinders, water jackets, holes in auto bodies, hog troughs, boilers, tanks, milk cans, radios, batteries, etc. Iron, Steel, Brass, Copper and Tin can be worked on for a quick and permanent repair. The repaired part will be as strong as before.

NEW 110 VOLT CONVERTER MAKES FULL SIZE PROFESSIONAL UNIT

This new converter is used on any 110 volt 60 cycle electric light socket in place of a storage battery. It is especially designed to be used with the Trindl Electric Arc Welder—COSTS LESS THAN A GOOD BATTERY—The combination makes a full size professional electric arc welder that everybody can use. Ideal for fender and repair shop needs. This is a sensation, not only in price but also in actual results. The converter represents the same fine construction and engineering skill as the arc welder. The complete outfit, including the transformer, is easily portable so that it can be brought right to the job.

USERS SWEAR BY IT—The price is so low that now anyone can afford to have a real welding outfit. Think of the profit you can make introducing this Trindl Welder and Converter—a simple five minute demonstration should make a sale to every interested prospect, especially when they hear the amazingly low price. Garages, radio and battery men, tinners, sheet metal workers, janitors, farmers and home-owners all need the Trindl Welder and Converter.

ACT NOW! There are big profits and a steady business waiting for you taking care of your territory for us. Don't let someone else get in before you—Send coupon Today.

TRINDL PRODUCTS

2229-SC Calumet Ave., Chicago, Ill.

FACTS

Here are just a few excerpts from the many letters of praise we have received from Trindl Electric Arc boosters.

"Please find enclosed for 12 welders by return mail for I am about sold out now. They are selling fine."—W. C. Anderson, Nebr.

"Received my Trindl Arc Welder and am both pleased and surprised."—Louis F. Glier, Ohio.

"Results are very gratifying with your welder. I am enclosing an order for 12 more Electric Arc Welders." — Nelson O. Lyster, Florida.

"I received my welder, and it is a regular repair shop in itself."—J. R. Harper, La.

"I sold 4 of your Trindl Electric Arc Welders in three minutes."—C. Gillies, Canada.

"I sold 9 welders in my first ten calls."—F. W. Stice, Iowa.

$10.50 a day profit for you for only selling 6 Trindl Arc Welders. No matter where you turn, you will find people who will want to buy arc welders from you. Garages, shop men, radio repair men, farmers, home-owners, mechanics, janitors, all of them need Trindl Electric Arc Welders. Be the man in your territory to clean up with Trindl.

MAIL COUPON NOW!

TRINDL PRODUCTS
2229-SC Calumet Ave.
Chicago, Illinois

Yes! Rush me free particulars of how I can make big money with Trindl Electric Arc Welders and Converters. This does not obligate me in any way.

Name .....

Local Address.....

City .....

State .....

THRILLING WESTERN

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Read our companion magazines: Thrilling Detective, Thrilling Adventures, Thrilling Ranch Stories, Thrilling Mystery, Thrilling Love, Thrilling Wonder Stories, Thrilling Sports, Thrilling Confessions, The Lone Eagle, G-Men, The Phantom Detective, Popular Detective, Popular Love, Popular Sports, Sky Fighters, Popular Western, Everyday Astrology, and Texas Rangers

I'LL SEND MY FIRST LESSON FREE

It Shows How I Train You at Home in Your Spare Time for a

GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 1914
The man who has directed the home study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.

Clip the coupon and mail it. I will prove I can train you at home in your spare time to be a RADIO EXPERT. I will send you my first lesson FREE. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand—how practical I make learning Radio at home. Men without Radio or electrical experience become Radio Experts, earn more money than ever as a result of my Training.

Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as $200 to $500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers, dealers as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts operate their own full time or part time Radio sales and service businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to $6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay, see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I have trained are holding good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read their statements. Mail the coupon.

There's a Real Future in Radio for Well Trained Men

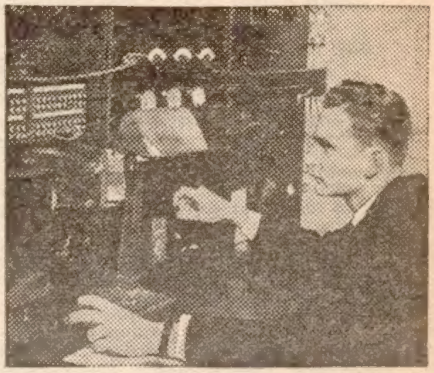
Radio already gives good jobs to more than 300,000 people. And in 1936, Radio enjoyed one of its most prosperous years. More than $500,000,000 worth of sets, tubes, and parts were sold—an increase of more than 60% over 1935. Over a million Auto Radios were sold, a big increase over 1935. 24,000,000 homes now have one or more Radio sets, and more than 4,000,000 autos are Radio equipped. Every year millions of these sets go out of date and are replaced with newer models. More millions need servicing, new tubes, repairs, etc. A few hundred $30, $50, $75 a week jobs have grown to thousands in 20 years. And Radio is still a new industry—growing fast!

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Almost every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs; how to cash in quickly. Throughout your training I send you plans that made good spare time money—$200 to $500 a year—for hundreds of fellows. My Training is famous as "the Course that pays for itself."

I Give You Practical Experience

My Course is not all book training. I send you special Radio equipment, show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important principles used in modern Radio receivers, broadcast stations, loud speaker installations. I show you how to build testing apparatus for use in spare time servicing from this equipment. Read about this 50-50 method of training—how it makes learning at home interesting, quick, fascinating, practical. Mail coupon.



Money Back Agreement Protects You

I am sure I can train you successfully. I agree in writing to refund every penny you pay me if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service when you finish. I'll send you a copy of this agreement with my Free Book.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Mail coupon for sample lesson and 64-page book. Both are free to anyone over 16 years old. My book points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained telling what they are doing, earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste it on a penny postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7J09
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Here's Proof

Service Manager For Four Stores

"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. In a few months I made enough to pay for the course three or four times. I am now Radio Service manager for the M——— Furniture Co., for their four stores." — JAMES E. RYAN, 1535 Slade St., Fall River, Mass.

$10 Week in Spare Time

"My work has consisted of Radio set servicing, with some Public Address Systems work—all in my spare time. My earnings in Radio amount to about $10 a week."— WILLIAM MEYER, 705 Ridge Road, Hobart, Ind.

Earnings Tripled By N.R.I. Training

"I have been doing nicely, thanks to N. R. I. Training. My present earnings are about three times what they were before I took the Course. I consider N. R. I. Training the finest in the world." — BERNARD COSTA, 201 Kent St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

The Tested WAY to BETTER PAY

MAIL COUPON NOW!

GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK SAMPLE LESSON FREE

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7J09,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send the sample lesson and your book which tells about the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please write plainly.)

NAME..... AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... STATE.....

The SWAP COUNTER

An Exchange Service for Readers

HERE'S where you can exchange something you have but don't want for something someone else has that you do want. This is a FREE service.

For example, if you have a camera and don't use it, and would like to have a stamp album, write: "Have Eastman camera No. 1, Jr., make, 3 years old, good condition, will exchange for stamp album with 3,000 stamps, 25 countries—John Smith, 49 Park Street, Albany, N. Y."

Limit your request to 25 words. No goods for sale listed, nor requests concerning firearms or any illegal articles.

Type or hand-print clearly in submitting announcements. THRILLING WESTERN will not be responsible for losses sustained. Make very plain just what you have and what you want to "swap" it for. Enclose a clipping of this statement with your request.

Have 4 tube elect. radio, late United States commemorative stamps, ice skates, flower seeds. Want complete bait casting outfit, United States stamps. Write to A. Kupec, 1807 Cleveland Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Who wants a beautiful full cabinet Victrola like new, complete with 100 records? Arthur R. White, 811 Bakewell Street, Covington, Kentucky.

Want to exchange stamps based on Scott Catalog ratings. Have over 2,000 duplicates. Send yours and state kind wanted. Harry Hannibal, Jr., 1391 Flatbush Avenue, Brooklyn, New York.

Have one set business man's commercial law library. Will swap for wood working, or carpenter tools, or binocular. Chas. McKinnis, 247 S. Maple St., Bowling Green, Ohio.

Have 50 United States large cents 2, 3 and 20c pieces. Have dimes, 10, 25 and 50 cent bills United States. Many other old coins for? F. L. White, 6513 South Avenue, Los Angeles, California.

Wish to trade microscope, stamps, coins and soft ball glove in good condition for what have you? Send your list and I will check my wants. Jack Nason, 2398 North Street, Beaumont, Texas.

Want an archery set, have 900 foreign and United States stamps, all different from about 100 or 150 countries. Jesse Buyke, P. O. Box 396, Linwood, Pa.

Have Indian relics, miniature animal watch charms, United States, foreign precancel stamps. Clyde O'Neal, Waco, Texas.

A new watch to trade. Want many items including poultry raising equipment, books on all branches of farming, correspondence courses, many other items. All offers appreciated. Write to Roy H. Dellinger, 302 West Main Street, Cartersville, Georgia.

For trade old United States coins from 1797 up one hundred. C. L. Doyle, Schenley, Pa.

Want to offer Junior camera, stamps book, electric film projector, mandolin guitar, soldiers, and stone fort. What have you to offer me? Max Doerner, 502 Central Avenue, Cedarhurst, L. I., N. Y.

Tattooing outfit, horse hair bridle, Washburne banjo, archery sets, Chinese lamp, ship model, and many other things. Send your offers. Mr. Miller, 433 Main, Norfolk, Va.

Will exchange 25 match book covers or 3 views of S. F. Oakland Bay Bridge for 5 magazines, western or detective, or 1 bound book, fiction. Send yours post paid, covers or views will follow same day as yours is received. B. Fisher, 172-6th St., No. 410, San Francisco, Cal.

Have old United States stamps 1851-1870. Swap for other United States stamps. Norman Tremper, East Winfield, New York.

Have six string guitar with instruction book, tennis racquet, old magazines. Want typewriter or used filling station equipment, or what have you? James Wilson, R. F. D. No. 58, Deming, N. Mexico.

Make best offers for latest 5 tube car radio, airplane type dial, all electric. S. Trock, Jr., 100 W. Washington St., Manitoke, Penna.

Will swap small new and used clothing business for improved southern Missouri or Northern Arkansas farm. John A. Puder, 1312 Main Street, Keokok, Iowa.

Am offering radio parts, coil forms, sockets, tubes, speaker, wire, condensers, rheostats, switches, etc. Want tenor banjo course, sheet music. Make offers. Earl Johnson, Doran, Minnesota.

Have books, toys and want two or three tube wave set or binoculars of 6 or more power. Joe Betancourt, Jr., Callejon Golfo de Mexico, No. 34, Cananea, Sonora, Mexico.

Want typewriter and electric portable phonograph in exchange for tenor banjo, violin, 3,000 ft. theater film, Ansco folding camera. V. H. Poe, 830 Statesman St., Walla Walla, Wash.

Offering books, poems, songs, portable phonograph for sheet music, poetry, anthologies, novels by Curwood, John Fox, Jr., and Lucy Furman. Harrison Elliott, Lackey, Ky.

I have a complete Taxidermy course, also 7 cell spotlight with double switch. Want large folding camera. Lionel Lapointe, 520 Virgin St., Rumford, Me.

Fine battery charger, 8 electric camper lights, cabin boat plans, 300 rare photos, wrestling course, 500 good United States stamps. Want suitcase. Send to Reaoch, 128 Cookman Avenue, Ocean Grove, N. J.

Willing to swap my entire collection of stamps (over 40 years old) for the best offer. Albert Snyder, Box 56, Storry, Connecticut.

Will give camera, stamps, 2 watches, radio, etc., for all radio parts. Especially want parts for midget radio. Send lists. Jim H. Rockwell, Mondovi, Wisc.

Best offer for my 22 x 27 inch canvas oil painting entitled After the Hunt. Send details of offer by letter. No cards acknowledged. John Daniels, No. 9 Harrison Avenue, Easthampton, Mass.

Have violin, mandolin, set of bells, cameras, new field glasses, microscope, etc. Want coins, books, stamps, relics, etc. J. Settel, 24 Crosby Avenue, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Attention! I have 3-10 pc. chromium trim toilette sets. Manicure, beauty needs, perfumes, hosiery, watch, chain, knife combinations, cards, punch boards, pen sets, inlaid cases, and hundred of other things. Want United State coins. H. Grogan, 140-19 N. Y. Blvd, Jamaica, New York City.

I'll bet real money you can learn to play *this easy fascinating way*

YES, I mean actually play real music—classical numbers or jazz—so that you'll be able to entertain your friends—to be popular everywhere.

And what's more, you won't need a private teacher. You'll learn all by yourself—right in your own home. And best of all the cost is only a small fraction of what it used to cost by old-fashioned methods.

Why am I so sure? Simply because more than 700,000 other men and women, boys and girls—no more clever—no more gifted than you—have studied music by this modern system.

No Special Talent Required

Learning to play this U. S. School of Music way is easy as A-B-C. No special talent is required—no previous musical training. Even if you don't know one note from the other you can learn to play by this simple method. For there is nothing tricky about it—no complicated theories—nothing to memorize. You learn to play from real notes—the same as those used by accomplished musicians.

And with this shortcut system you have the fun of learning real tunes—right from the very beginning. And almost before you realize it you are able to pick up almost any piece of music and play it.

Clear as Crystal

The best part of it all is that it is so simple—so crystal clear—so easy to understand. It's all right before you in print and pictures. First you are *told* how to do a thing. Then a picture *shows* you how to do it. Then you actually do it yourself and *hear* it. It's fascinating fun, too—practicing becomes a real interesting pastime instead of a wearisome task.

PICK YOUR INSTRUMENT

Piano	Guitar
Violin	Saxophone
Organ	Mandolin
Cornet	Ukulele
Trombone	Harp
Piccolo	Clarinet
Flute	'Cello

Hawaiian Steel Guitar
Trumpet
Piano Accordion
Italian and German Accordion
Voice and Speech Culture
Harmony and Composition
Drums and Traps
Banjo (Plectrum, 5-String or Tenor)

Free Demonstration Lesson

So that you may see for yourself how easy, how pleasant it is to learn by this modern, simplified method, the U. S. School of Music has prepared an Illustrated Booklet and typical Demonstration Lesson which are yours for the asking. They explain fully the principles of this remarkable method and how it enables you to become a popular musician in a surprisingly short time, at a cost of only a few cents a day.

If you are really serious about wanting to learn music—if you honestly want to become popular—to have the pleasure of entertaining your friends—take this first step *today*—send for this Free Booklet and Free Demonstration Lesson. Don't put it off. Mail the coupon below and they will be sent to you promptly. No obligation. Instruments supplied where needed, cash or credit. U. S. School of Music, 2949 Brunswick Building, New York City.

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC
2949 Brunswick Bldg., N. Y. C.

Please send me your free book, "How You Can Learn Music in Your Own Home," with inspiring message by Dr. Frank Crane, Free Demonstration Lesson and particulars of your easy payment plan. I am interested in the following course:

Have you
.....Instrument? .....

Name .....

Address .....

City..... State.....

INVISIBLE INK. CAN BE READ ONLY BY THOSE WHO KNOW THE SECRET. USED BY SPIES, ETC. COMPLETE DIRECTIONS. 10c BOTTLE.

FIELD GLASSES

WOW! What a bargain! Real genuine Field Glasses with six power magnification. Center piece quick, one finger focussing. Permits full, unhampered, two eyed vision that gives remarkable scope and clarity. Swell for nature study, hiking, sports, and a million other things. Complete with cord, packed in box. ONLY 39c

Pocket Telescope

Eagle-Eye Vision
Six Power
25c

Big. 3 draw, 6 power telescope for only 25c! Swell for outdoors, nature study, sports, looking at the moon. Converted into Solar telescope by using smoke glass so you can see sun spots, etc. 5" long. Price 25 cents

BROADCAST *thru your radio* TALK - SING - PLAY

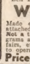
BROADCAST your voice on programs coming through your own radio set—make announcements from any part of the house—inject wise cracks, josh and mystify friends. Imitate radio stars, practice crooning, singing, radio acting, etc. Do a "Ben Bernie" or a "Rudy Valee."

World Mike

Made especially for home use, attached in a jiffy without tools. **Not a toy.** Put on your own programs at home, parties, club affairs, etc. Barrels of fun!. Easy to operate.

Price Postpaid 25c

DELUXE MIKE



Large, substantial, all metal mike. Practise radio singing, broadcasting, programs, etc., thru your own radio. Reproduces voice in loud, clear tone without distortion. Regular table model—can be held in hand. Guaranteed. Connected without tools.. Price 75c

ALL WAVE WORLD WIDE RADIOS

Remarkable results—simple operation—low prices! 15 to 600 meters. Gets police calls, foreign stations anywhere, code, short wave, foreign and domestic broadcasts, etc., with remarkable volume and efficiency. Each set complete without tube, phone, battery or aerial. **ONE TUBE BATTERY SET.** Good headphone volume. Complete Kit **$1.55** Wired ready to operate $2.30. **SUPER ONE TUBE BATTERY SET.** Gives better volume & reception. Complete Kit $2.00 Wired, ready to operate $2.75. **ELECTRIC TWO TUBE.** Operates on house current. Uses no batteries. Powerful, sensitive, selective. Kit, $3.00. Wired, ready to operate. $3.75.

Open Any Lock

Did you ever lose or forget your keys? Probably many times. Don't worry any more about lost keys (or any keys, for that matter), as these master keys will open most ordinary door locks. Five different keys for various types of locks. Will save their cost if you only use them once, but you'll probably find them so handy that you'll always carry them

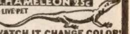
5 MASTER KEYS Price 25c

CRYSTAL RADIO 25c

This is a radio in itself as it is possible to get reception with it alone within 25 miles of a station (or up to 100 miles under good conditions). All you need is an aerial & ear phone. Completely assembled & wired with supersensitive crystal, stand, base, crystal cup, arm with cat's whisker, etc. Reception guaranteed. 25c

CHAMELEON 25c

A LIVE PET



WATCH IT CHANGE COLOR!

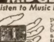
Get one of these most wonderful of all creatures. Watch it change color. Study its habits. Wear one on the lapel of your coat as a curiosity. Shoots out its tongue to catch flies and insects for food. No trouble to keep. Can go for months without food. About 4 in. long. Shipped to any address in USA by mail. We guarantee safe arrival and live delivery. Only 25c

Quartermaster - Navy - CCC . Marine - Army Ring

Big jumbo size, with a flashy emblem, surrounded by the American Eagle. Like the U.S. Government men wear! State type and size. **Silver Finish, 25c** Sterling Silver, $1.00. 14 kt. Gold Ring, $1.75.

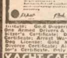
MIDGET POCKET RADIO $1.00

Listen to Music Programs and Sports Everywhere You Go! Loud Tone



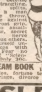
Beautiful clear tone while you walk! The amazing midget pocket radio gives you all the entertainment of a radio wherever you are—in the country, office, on a boat, in a car, hotel, in bed, on bicycles, **ANYWHERE and EVERYWHERE.** Size of a cigarette package, yet it operates perfectly. **Beautiful clear tone.** Range, 50 miles. No static or noise. **No batteries, no tubes, no crystals to adjust,** just one moving dial to locate stations. New sensitive rectifier and high efficiency design. Not a toy. **Price Postpaid $1.00. Earphone, 89c. Phone & Radio Set $1.79.**

FUN LICENSES 10c



Large size, nicely printed with seal, suitable for framing. Hand one of these to your friend and he will never forget you! Your choice: Liar's License; Bootleggers Diploma; Marriage Certificate (it looks real); Liar's & grafter's Certificate; Gossiper's Certificate; Spanish Athletes (Bull Throwers) Certificate; Gold Diggers & Grafters Certificate; One Armed Drivers & Neckers Certificate; Kibitzer's Certificate; Death Certificate; Birth Certificate; Arrest Warrant; College Diploma, Dog License; Gold Mine Stock Certificate; Divorce Certificate; Air Pilot's License; Doctor's Certificate. Only 10c each, 3 for 25c.

JU-JITSU DON'T BE BULLIED 30c



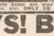
The Japanese art of self-defense. New methods of attack and defense are given, illustrated so that you cannot fail to understand them. Deals fully with trips, throws, wrist locks, body holds, defense against revolvers, strangling, armlocks, scissors, splits, headlock, holding a man down, double knee throw, stick attack, defense against knife, one hand throat grip, defense against two assailants, stomach throw, secret thumb knockout, nerve pinches, and numerous others. Learn to protect yourself under all circumstances with nature's weapons. Fear no man, guns or knives! "Science of Ju Jitsu" Only 30c.

OLD MADGE'S DREAM BOOK Dreams, lucky numbers, fortunes, oracles, fortune telling tablets, astrology, marriage, divorce & births, etc. Price 25c.

New Vest Pocket Adding Machine

Adds, subtracts, multiplies, divides. Does work of a costly machine. Ten million capacity. Simple and accurate. **NOT A TOY.** Easy to operate. No keys to punch, no lever to pull. Total always visible. Guaranteed for 5 years. Lightning calculator and time saver. Constructed of steel ensuring strength, durability and reliability. Lasts a lifetime. Compact and light. Weight 7 oz. Will fit right in vest pocket and can be carried about without inconvenience. 3x6in. Price.. **$1.50**

Radio & Television Books



How to build inexpensive crystal sets, electric radio, short wave radio, hints on building television set. With a television set you can **SEE** as well as **HEAR** reception. Tells how a simple home set may be built. Book of plans, etc. ONLY 10 CENTS.

HOW TO TAP DANCE

PRICE 25c

Why envy the easy rhythm and fascinating grace of Step'n Fetchit, Fred Astaire etc. Tap dance in ONLY 6 HOURS by a new simplified course by Prof. Wilson. No special ability needed. Be smart! Everybody's tapping. The whole town is tapping. Beat out a tune with your feet.

310 Illustrations

Hostesses love it. Friends adore it. Besides, tap dancing is not only invigorating and entertaining but is also a healthful exercise for making the limbs supple and giving a "springy" feeling of fitness to the whole body. Promotes slimness nature's way—no pills, drugs or dieting. Readers say: "..wonderful benefit. Thank you for adding tap dancing to my accomplishments." Price 25c postpaid.

YACHT CAPS 25c

Smart, snappy. Just what every real boy is wearing. Cool and comfortable. White Twill Yacht Cap, with black oilcloth peak, sweat band, gold braid and brass buttons with anchor. Price 25c White Duck Yacht Cap, superior quality duck, white celluloid cap, gold cord, brass buttons and red, white and blue anchor on front. State size. Price postpaid 35c

Learn DANCING

OVER 101 ILLUSTRATIONS

25 Cents

LATEST STEPS. Be popular. Good dancers are always admired—always popular guests. Partners welcome them eagerly. The newest, smartest steps without a teacher. Don't make excuses when the music starts. Get lots of fun from parties and dances.

If you want to become a perfect dancer, learn to dance at home this new easy way. **BOOK TELLS:** How to develop poise and control, improve your dance steps, art of holding, how to walk to music, how to lead, latest fox trot steps. Natural and Reverse Turns, the Reverse Wave, The Quickstep swaying to music, Waltz, Backward changes, the Continental, The famous Kiss dance, the Manhattan, the College Rhumba, the Carlo, Charleston, etc. Art of Dancing 25c

BOYS! BOYS! BOYS!

THROW YOUR VOICE!

Into a trunk, under the bed or anywhere. Lots of fun fooling teacher, policeman or friends.

THE WONDERFUL VENTRILO

a little instrument, fits in the mouth out of sight, used with above for Bird Calls, etc. Anyone can use it. Never fails. A complete book with full course on Ventriloquism together with the Ventrilo. Sent postpaid for only....... **10c**

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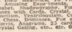
Pistol Cigarette Case 25c

It looks like a deadly weapon, but it is merely a novel Cigarette Case. Better than the real thing in many an awkward encounter. Great fun "sticking up" your friends. They squirm and protest. Pull the trigger and the slide flies open, disclosing cigarettes. Price 25c

REPEATING SLING SHOT

Automatic repeating slingshot that will fire 150 shots with one loading! Designed for accuracy. Bulls eye every time. Extremely powerful and hard hitting—will go thru a 100 page magazine. More powerful than an air rifle. Sturdily constructed with non slip sure leather shot holder and thick lively cords. 150 BBs. Slingo, the automatic slingshot, only 25c. Tube of 200 Copper coated BB's, 10c. Bell ringing Target, 30c.

BIG ENTERTAINER



326 Jokes & Riddles, 25 Tricks, 10 Parlor Games, 73 Toasts, 13 Stories, 105 Money-making Secrets, 22 Monologs, 21 Puzzles, Problems, Comic recitations, Funny Readings, 10 Parlor Pastimes, 13 Flirtations, 1000 Names & their Meanings, 10 Picture Puzzles, 37 Amusing Experiments, Deaf and Dumb Alphabet, Shadowgraphy, Fortune Teller, Fortunes with Cards, Crystal, Tea Cup, etc., Hypnotism, Ventriloquism, Cut-outs for Checkers, Chess, Dominoes, Fox and Geese, 9 Men Morris, Anagrams, 25 card Tricks, Crystal Gazing, etc., etc. Only **15c**

COMPLETE CAMERA OUTFIT

35c

Although this outfit is so marvelously cheap, it is quite efficient, and will take splendid pictures. Takes pictures 2 x 1 1/4 inches, sharp and distinct. Good lens, view finder a simple yet effective shutter, time and instantaneous. Complete with 4 films, 1 package of printing paper, printing frame with glass top, and a supply of chemicals for developing, fixing and turning out the finished picture, full printed instructions so plainly written that a child cannot fail to understand. Camera and complete outfit for only 35c with 10c extra for postage and packing. Extra film 10c per package of five films. Extra printing paper 10c per package.

MIDGET RACER

Complete blueprints for 3 different racers. The one illustrated can be built for a few dollars. All about racer parts, gears, transmissions, dirt track racers, track regulations, blueprints, plans. **ADD A MOTOR TO YOUR BIKE** at low cost, increasing speed, etc., etc. Crammed & jammed full of information

25c

Over 75 illustrations, plans & blueprints. COMPLETE BOOK only 25c.

Midget Bible Size of postage stamp. Over 200 pages. Said to bring good luck to owner. Price 15c.

BlankCartridgePistol

50c
$1.00

Two of the latest, newest models now out—**50c and $1.00.** Patterned after the latest type of revolver. Shoots 22 caliber blank cartridges obtainable everywhere. Handy protection against burglars, tramps and dogs. Fine for 4th of July, New Years, stage work, starting pistol, etc., etc.

Looks Like A Real Revolver

Strongly constructed with a flashy nickel finish. Has dip barrel that allows the cartridges to be loaded in a second. **Medium size, Large size $1.00. Blank Cartridges 50c per 100. Holster (Cowboy Type), 50c. SHIPPED BY EXPRESS, NOT PREPAID.**

6 Shot Automatic Blued steel 6-shot automatic blank pistol. Fires blanks only. Looks exactly like expensive automatic. Shipped by express, not prepaid. Price $5.50. Uses special cartridges, 75c per 100.

INSERT A COIN AND OUT COMES A DELICIOUS CHOCOLATE BAR

Thrift Bank and Slot Machine

The most novel, popular and useful bank ever invented! A regular slot machine, savings bank and profit-maker all in one. Just think of having this handy bank around, and as soon as your friends drop in a penny, nickel or dime—out comes a chocolate bar, all wrapped up! **Leave the bank around the house and you will soon find that it fills up while you're gone.** An easy way to save money—and make money!

Get Plenty of Chocolates—They'll Go Fast!

Well made of sheet metal with a regular locked door so you can open and remove the money and fill it with chocolate bars. On the front is a **slot to drop the coin in, a window showing the chocolate bars, and a regular drawer that opens when each coin is deposited.** Handsomely lithographed in brilliant yellow, green and red. Get two or three banks and PLENTY of refills—they'll go fast. **25c** **SWEET THRIFT BANK & SLOT MACHINE. Only** **Chocolate Bars to fit in the Machine. Package of 10....10c**

LUMINOUS PAINT

LUMINOUS PAINT, when applied to an object, emits rays of white light, rendering it visible in the dark. The darker the night—the brighter it shines. Simple to use—you can do it! Apply some to the dial of your watch so you can tell time at night. Paint pushbuttons, switches, anything, everything with it. **Small Bottle, 25c. Medium size 50c. Large size $1.00 postpaid.**

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Perpetual Rose Bush seeds produce one of the most amazing varieties of the rose ever developed. May be sown either indoors or outdoors and blooms the first year it is planted, and when three years old, the bush is a mass of roses. Three Shades—white, pink and crimson. WE GUARANTEE IT TO PRODUCE SPLENDID FULL SIZE ROSES. Blooms regularly. **Packet. 10c**

HOW TO LOVE AND BE LOVED. An interesting and complete book on this passionate subject. Read and profit. ONLY 10c POSTPAID.

10 TO 25 LBS. GAINED WITH NEW 3-WAY TREATMENT

SKINNY?

New Quick Way Gives Thousands Solid Pounds Fast!

WHEN thousands of formerly skinny, rundown, friendless people have gained pounds of solid, normally good-looking flesh with this new triple-acting treatment, it's a crime for thousands of others to remain thin and unattractive. Actually, with this sensationally quick new body-builder, you may not only gain normal, flattering pounds, but also naturally clear skin, freedom from indigestion and constipation, new pep and popularity.

Doctors now know that the real reason why many find it hard to gain weight is they do not get enough Vitamin B and iron in their food. Without these vital elements you may lack appetite and not get the most body-building good out of what you eat. Now with this new discovery which combines these elements in little concentrated tablets, hosts of people have put on pounds of firm flesh, normal heftiness—*in a very short time.*

This amazing new product, Ironized Yeast, is made from special imported cultured ale yeast, one of the richest known sources of Vitamin B. By a new process this special yeast is concentrated 7 times—*made 7 times more powerful.* Then it is combined with 3 kinds of iron, pasteurized whole yeast and other valuable ingredients in pleasant little tablets.

If you, too, need these vital elements to aid in building you up, get these new "7-power" Ironized Yeast tablets from your druggist today. Note how quickly they increase your appetite and help you get more benefit from the body-building foods that are so essential. Then day after day watch flat chest develop and skinny limbs round out to natural attractiveness. Soon you feel like an entirely different person, with new charm, new personality.

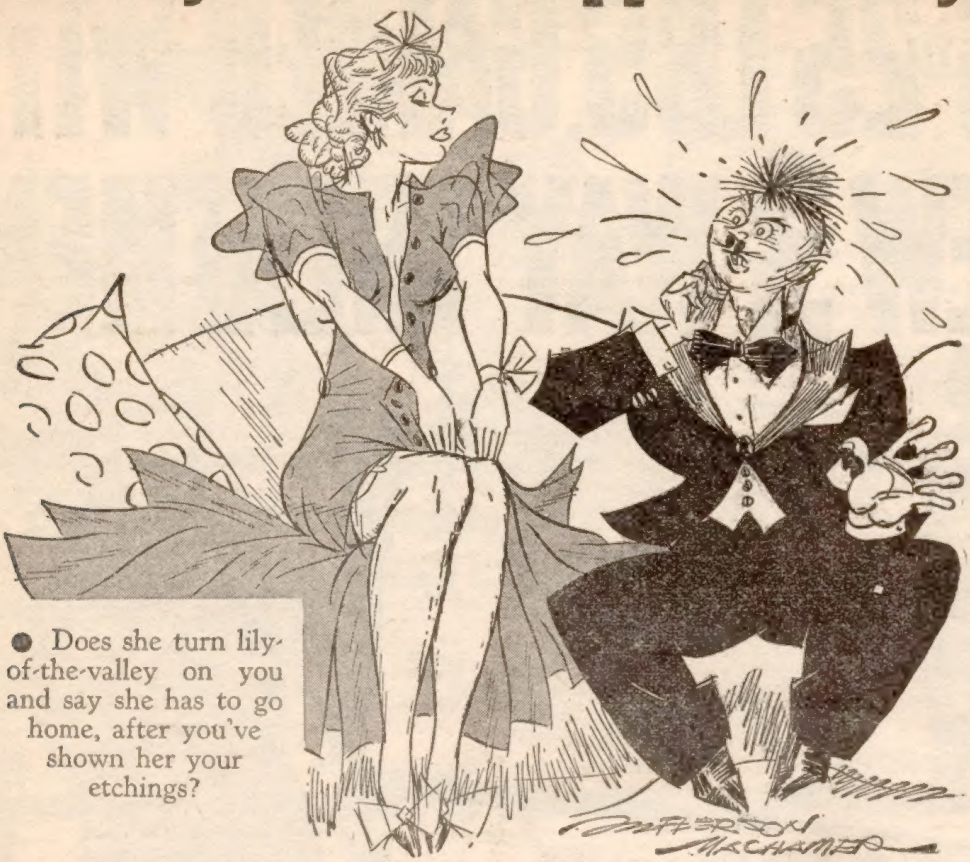
Money-back guarantee

No matter how skinny and rundown you may be from lack of enough Vitamin B and iron, try these new Ironized Yeast tablets just a short time, and note the marvelous change. See if they don't aid in building you up in just a few weeks, as they have helped thousands of others. If you are not delighted with the benefits of the very first package, your money will be instantly refunded.

Special FREE offer!

To start thousands building up their health right away, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast tablets at once, cut out seal on box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body." Remember, results with very first package—or money refunded. At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co. Inc., Dept. 779, Atlanta, Ga.

How's your Sex Appeal today?



● Does she turn lily-of-the-valley on you and say she has to go home, after you've shown her your etchings?

WHEN she babbles about Bob Considine and Peter Arno and Heywood Broun and Jeff Machamer, do you grunt and ask where the devil she has been meeting these new guys?

When you cut in on her and dust off the old one about the traveling salesman and the farmer's daughter, do you wonder why she flags the stag-line?

When you invite her up to your room to see your etchings, does she turn lily-of-the-valley on you and say she has to go home?

And, after you've spent all your money on theatre tickets and taxis and lobster suppers, does she turn a cold shoulder on you and go for a perfectly nondescript freshman just because he knows so many cute paper games?

Fella, if your answer to even one of these pertinent questions is "yes," you need COLLEGE HUMOR. You need it badly! You need COLLEGE HUMOR in your life to keep you on-your-toes about the smart writers and artists.

You need COLLEGE HUMOR, with its bright quips and cartoons, to keep your line whittled to a fine edge. You need the "Mental Merry-Go-Round," a monthly game feature, to make you a social success.

And most of all, you need COLLEGE HUMOR tossed casually about your room as bait for skittish maidens. (Actual figures prove that COLLEGE HUMOR gets 50% better response than etchings.)

Don't delay a minute! Clip the coupon below and send it off NOW.

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NINE ISSUES FOR

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My dollar is pinned to this coupon. Please send the next nine issues to:

Name.....

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City..... State.....

(Foreign, $1.60)

Why Trained Accountants Command High Salaries

—and how ambitious men are qualifying by the La Salle Problem Method

GET this straight.

By "accountancy" we do not mean "bookkeeping." For accountancy begins where bookkeeping leaves off.

The skilled accountant takes the figures handed him by the bookkeeper, and *analyzes* and *interprets* them.

He knows how much the costs in the various departments should amount to, how they may be lowered.

He knows what profits should be expected from a given enterprise, how they may be increased.

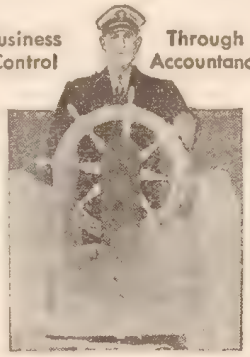
He knows, in a given business, what per cent of one's working capital can safely be tied up in merchandise on hand, what per cent is safe and adequate for sales promotion. And these, by the way, are but two of *scores* of percentage-figures wherewith he points the way to successful operation.

He knows the intricacies of government taxation.

He knows how to *survey* the transactions of a business over a given period; how to show in cold, hard figures the progress it has made and where it is going. He knows how to *use* these findings as a basis for constructive policies.

In short, the trained accountant is the *controlling engineer* of business—one man business cannot do without.

Small wonder that he commands a salary two to ten times as great as that of the bookkeeper. Indeed, as an independent operator (head of his own accounting firm) he may earn as much as the president of the big and influential bank in his community, or the operating manager of a great railroad.



Some Examples

Small wonder that accountancy offers the trained man such fine opportunities—opportunities well illustrated by the success of thousands of LaSalle accountancy students.* For example—one man was a plumber, 32 years old, with only an eleventh grade education. Today he is auditor for a large bank and his income is 325 per cent larger.

Another was a drug clerk at $30 a week. Now he heads his own very successful accounting firm with an income many times as large.

A woman bookkeeper—buried in details of a small job—is now auditor of an apartment hotel, and her salary mounted in proportion to her work.

A credit manager—earning $200 a month—moved up quickly to $3000, to $5000, and then to a highly profitable accounting business of his own which nets him better than $10,000 a year.

And What It Means to You

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you can equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable profession?

Are you really *determined* to get ahead? If so, you can start at once to acquire—by the LaSalle Problem Method—a thorough understanding of Higher Accountancy, master its fundamental principles, become expert in the practical application of those principles—this without losing an hour from work or a dollar of pay.

Preliminary knowledge of bookkeeping is unnecessary. You will be given whatever training, instruction or review on the subject of bookkeeping you may personally need—and without any extra expense to you.

If you are dissatisfied with your present equipment—if you recognize the opportunities that lie ahead of you through home-study training — you will do well to send at once for full particulars. The coupon will bring them to you without any obligation, also details of LaSalle's convenient payment plan.

Check, sign and mail the coupon NOW.

LaSalle Extension University
DEPT. 9329-HR CHICAGO

Opportunities in Accountancy—Check below and we will send you a copy of "Accountancy, the Profession that Pays," without obligation.

☐ **Higher Accountancy:**

Other LaSalle Opportunities: If more interested in one of the other fields of business indicated below, check here:

- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Modern Salesmanship
- ☐ Traffic Management
- ☐ Law: Degree of LL. B.
- ☐ Commercial Law
- ☐ Industrial Management
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Credit and Collection Correspondence
- ☐ Modern Foremanship
- ☐ Personnel Management
- ☐ Expert Bookkeeping
- ☐ C. P. A. Coaching
- ☐ Business English
- ☐ Stenotypy
- ☐ Effective Speaking
- ☐ Railway Accounting

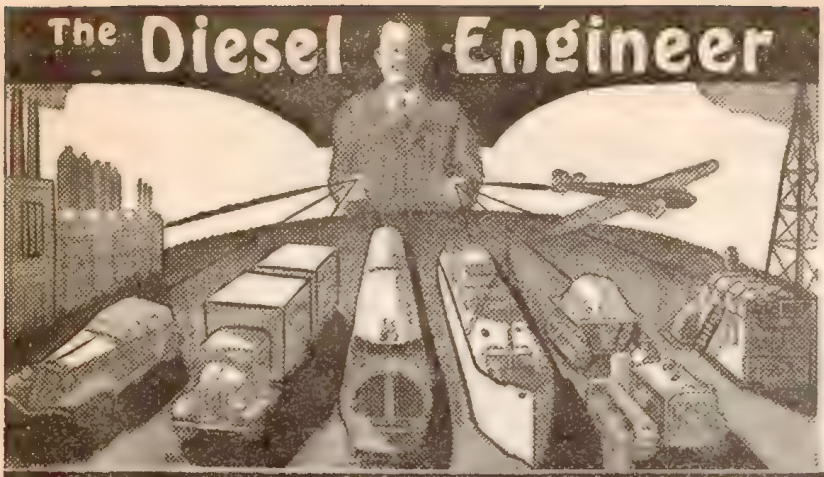
Name .....

Present Position .....

Address .....

*Names available on request.

The Diesel Engineer



Is Your Job Safe?

Just as the gasoline engine changed or wiped out the jobs of thousands who depended on horse-drawn vehicles for their living—just as electricity changed the entire set-up in the fields of light and power—so now the Diesel engine is fast invading both the power and transportation fields, and threatening the present jobs of thousands of workers.

To Men Over 18—Under 40:
This offer is NOT open to boys under 18 or men over 40. But if you are WITHIN these age limits, you owe it to yourself to investigate this unusual opportunity of acquainting yourself with a NEW field and a REAL future.

2 Diesel Lessons Free

Diesel—The New, Fast-Growing Power

Diesel engines are replacing steam and gasoline engines in power plants, motor trucks and buses, locomotives and ships, aircraft, tractors, dredges, pumps, etc.—opening up well-paid jobs for Diesel-trained men. You get all the latest Diesel developments in our course. Special diagrams for quick understanding of this new power. If jobs in your line are steadily growing scarcer, you owe it to yourself to investigate this new, progressive, uncrowded line, that in our opinion will offer good openings for the next 25 years.

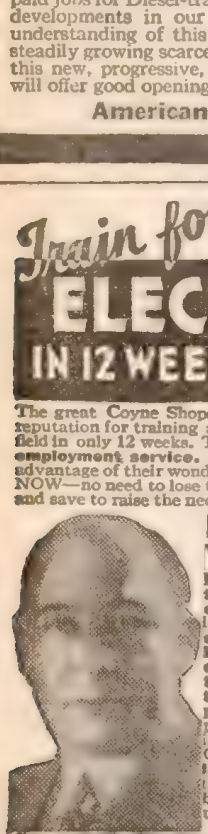
Can You Learn Diesel? If you are over 18 and under 40, we want to give you the opportunity of finding out. So, *without obligation on your part,* we will send you 2 beginning lessons. In your own home, look them over. See how clearly all is explained—how thoroughly you grasp every point—how definitely you progress step by step—so that your knowledge of Diesel grows constantly. This simple trial may be the turning point in your life—*so write to us* TODAY! State age.

American School, Dept. D-658, Drexel Avenue at 58th Street, Chicago, Illinois

Test Yourself for a Good Pay Job—Steady Work

Train for ELECTRICITY IN 12 WEEKS AT COYNE

The great Coyne Shops in Chicago have a world-wide reputation for training ambitious fellows for this big-pay field in only 12 weeks. Then you get **lifetime graduate employment service.** By my new plan YOU can take advantage of their wonderful method of learning-by-doing NOW—no need to lose time and money while you strive and save to raise the necessary tuition.



I WILL FINANCE YOUR TRAINING

I have a plan where many **get training first.** Then they have **over a year** to pay for their training in **easy monthly payments, starting 60 days after the regular 3-months training period is over,** or 5 months from the day they start school. If you will write to me at once I will send you complete details of this sensational new plan, together with the **Big Free** illustrated **Book** telling all about COYNE and how **many earn while learning** and training you can get there **without book study** or useless theory.

H. C. Lewis

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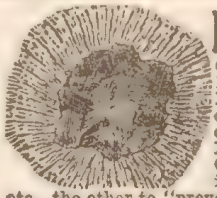
MR. H. C. LEWIS, President
Dept. 67-84, 500 S. Paulina St., Chicago, Ill.
Send me all details of your **"pay-tuition-after-graduation"** plan and your big FREE catalog.

NAME .....AGE....
ADDRESS.....
CITY..... STATE.....



BELIEVE IN LUCK?-$

Carry a pair of GENUINE BRAHMA RED LIVE HIGHLY MAGNETIC LODESTONES! Legend reputes, Occult Oriental ancients superstitiously carried two Live Lodestones as MOST POWERFUL MAGNETIC "LUCKY" CHARMS, one to "attract" Good Luck in Money, Games, Love, Business, Work, etc., the other to "prevent" Bad Luck, Losses, Evil, Trouble, Harm, etc. Believe in Luck? Carry a Pair of these curious Genuine Brahma Red Live Lodestones! We make no supernatural claims. $1.97 Postpaid for the two, with all information. $1.97 and 15c extra if C.O.D. Satisfaction GUARANTEED or Money Returned. Order yours NOW!

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NOTICE! Beware of imitations! We absolutely GUARANTEE these Genuine Brahma Lodestones are ALIVE! We believe they are just what you want, the REAL THING—POWERFUL DRAWING, EXTRA HIGHLY MAGNETIC! Fully Guaranteed—Order TODAY! Copyright 1937—A. Co.

SELF DEFENSE

Can YOU defend your girl friend?

Learn to fight scientifically by correspondence. Thrilling, fascinating, easy to learn. Not boxing or wrestling, but a new method, combining the most famous systems. Fully illustrated. Individually taught by a master. Send 10c for information to

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POPULAR DETECTIVE

On Sale Everywhere **10c** *Per Copy*

ANNOUNCEMENT
of New Coffee Agency Openings

EARNINGS UP TO $60.00 IN A WEEK

Within the next two weeks, over 350 men and women will be given the opportunity to open up fine-paying Coffee Agencies right in their own home localities. If you are looking for a bona fide chance to make as high as $60.00 in a week, starting at once, this company will send you everything you need, give you all the help you require, and back you up with its proven successful plans. You risk no money. A chance to be independent, work as you please, and make more than just a modest living. If you want to know whether there is an opening for you in your own or nearby locality, mail the Application below. By return mail you will be notified whether we have an opening for you, and if we have, you will receive full information about this Coffee Agency Plan. You don't send a penny—just mail the Application. No obligation—you decide after you read the plan. Don't delay. Send your Application at once.

Clip Out and Mail Today!!

COFFEE AGENCY APPLICATION

(1) WRITE YOUR FULL NAME AND ADDRESS HERE!

Name.....
(State whether Mr., Mrs., or Miss)

Address.....

City and State.....

(2) HOW MUCH TIME CAN YOU DEVOTE To COFFEE AGENCY?

Mark with an "X"

☐ FULL TIME ☐ PART TIME

[Full time pays up to $35 to $60 in a week. Part time, either during the day or evenings, pays up to $22.50 in a week.]

(3) STATE WHICH BONUS YOU PREFER—CASH OR FORD AUTOMOBILE?

In addition to their cash earnings, we offer our producers a cash bonus of $500.00 or a brand-new, latest model Ford Tudor Sedan. State which you would prefer if you decide to accept our offer. Mark "X" before your choice.

☐ $500. CASH BONUS ☐ LATEST MODEL FORD TUDOR SEDAN.

(4) CAN YOU START AT ONCE?

Mark with an "X" ☐ YES ☐ NO

If you cannot start at once, state about when you will be able to start.

ALL APPLICATIONS WILL BE HELD STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

SEND NO MONEY

There is no money fee of any kind required with this Application. It merely tells us that you would consider running a Coffee Agency in your locality if we have an opening for you. You will be notified *by return mail* whether your home locality is available. Then you can decide if the money-making possibilities look good to you. No obligation on your part. Those who apply first will be given preference, so be sure to mail your Application without delay—NOW! No letter is required, just the Application. Mail at once to

ALBERT MILLS, President
4073 Monmouth Avenue **Cincinnati, Ohio**

Husky Marshal, Vengeance-Bent, Crashes into

A Complete Action NOVEL

Marshal's six-shooter roared.

Circle

CHAPTER I

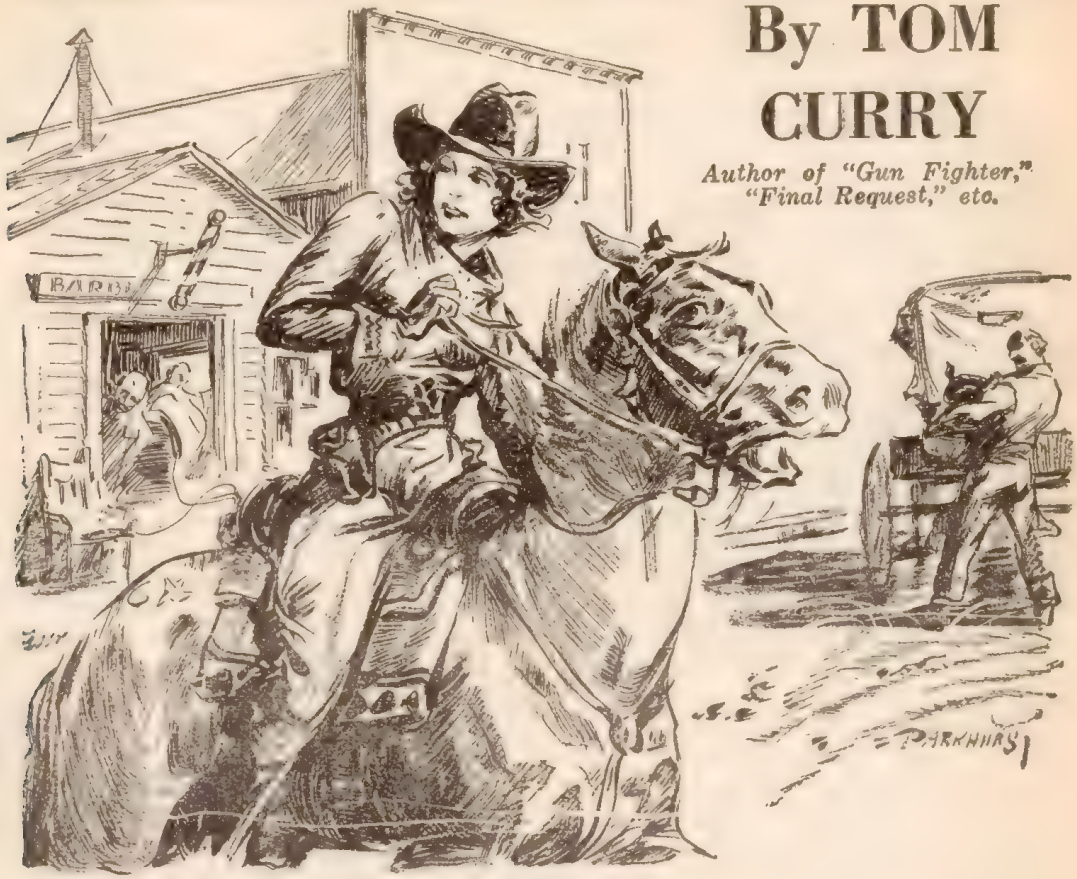
Quick Guns

"HUSKY" JACK MARSHAL shoved his paint pony Buck between the false fronts of frame houses lining the single street of Pleasant City. Dust covered the two. Marshal was glad to have the long ride from Texas behind him, to know that he could at last start solving the mystery which urged him on.

Pleasant City was not a city,

Pleasant City Gets a Taste of Lead

Gun Battle Against Polecats of the Range!



Georgia North was measuring him with her eyes

Star Trouble

By TOM CURRY

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neither was it pleasant. Set on a dreary alkali flat, swallowed like a pebble in the huge valley rimmed by mountains done in purple and green-brown, Pleasant City appeared dead. Husky was to discover that this look of inaction was also a lie.

So contented was he to be at the terminus of his journey that he broke into song.

"My gal's a Lulu, every inch a Lulu," he chortled, though he had no girl, much less a Lulu.

Dismounting at the saloon he tossed Buck's reins over the hitch bar.

"Oh, my gal's a Lulu, every—" He broke off, eyes narrowing a moment as he noted the Circle Star brand on the groomed rumps of two ponies standing close at hand.

He ducked under the bar to the dirt walk. His huge frame easily carried the two hundred pounds of hard flesh; his muscles were steel bands, shoulders broad as a steer's. But his bronzed face was placidly good-natured; many tiny wrinkles

Medicine When a Tall Texan Rides!

from the corners of his sky-blue eyes showed how readily he laughed. His great hands were as hard as the horns of cows he handled.

He paused on the worn boards of the saloon stoop, slapping white dust from his thorn-scarred leather chaps. Passing on he looked through the door, quick glance sweeping the interior of the bar. Among the drinkers, Marshal's attention was caught by a thick-set man of thirty, who wore a small trimmed mustache under a long nose, whose eastern riding clothes and shiny army boots, and whole get-up branded him a dude.

Standing beside the dude was a raw-boned, tall hombre whose tight chin-strap bunched up his long jaw, accentuating his tough appearance. There were others, evidently cowboys. And, at a table in the rear, dealing himself some dummy hands of cards, slouched a huge, fancy-dressed Mexican.

Slouching quietly in, Husky Marshal ordered a long, cool one. He stood at the bar and listened to the bits of conversation that floated above the buzz of harsh voices.

"Know any spread hereabouts who are takin' on riders?" he asked loudly of the bartender.

The barkeep stared at the tall, powerful figure. His fingertips disturbed the stringy brown hair as he scratched his head.

"Wal—I dunno." His eyes swung to meet the dude's, but the latter lowered his gaze to his glass of whiskey. So the bartender addressed the raw-boned man: "How 'bout it, Dermott? Yuh're Circle Star foreman now. Got any jobs open?"

Dermott seemed openly amused as he looked into Marshal's inquiring face. For a long time he did not speak.

"No, I ain't," he drawled, tone unnecessarily insolent. "I had some trouble and I aim to hire hombres I can trust." He deliberately turned his back on Marshal, who shrugged and finished his drink to cover the snub.

A girl's voice floated in: "Oh, Frank—I'm ready."

"C'mon, Harrison," Dermott said to the dude. "There's Miss Georgia."

The dude threw down two dollars to pay for the liquor and with Foreman Dermott swung and went out. The bartender sidled quickly to Marshal.

"That there lady is Miss Georgia North," he said in a low voice. "Her paw owns the Circle Star spread, the big outfit that occupies most of this valley. Whyn't yuh ask her do they need a waddy?"

Husky nodded his thanks for the tip and went out into the warm sunlight. He was impressed by the melancholy beauty of the young woman sitting her piebald pony. He pushed past Dermott and the dude who were disentangling their reins from the rack preparatory to mounting.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Husky began politely, "but I wonder could you use a top-hand at yore Circle Star? I've had lots of experience, can handle cattle every way and am also good at breakin' horses."

Her sad brown eyes did not change. They were *too* sad, thought Husky, for one so young. The dude scowled at Marshal and started to speak but the girl interrupted him.

"Why, we need punchers," she said quietly. "Dermott, hire this man."

DERMOTT'S face reddened—he knew as well as Marshal did that the owner of a spread has the privilege of hiring and firing, rather than the foreman. That was one thing that had irritated Marshal in the saloon, when Dermott had turned him down. Dermott seized Marshal's arm, pulled him around.

"Didn't I tell yuh we ain't hirin' bums?" the foreman said between gritted teeth. "Git," he added as he shoved Marshal away.

Dermott had made a stupid play. The good-natured look on Marshal's broad face faded as he whirled, and, coming back, hit Dermott so hard between the eyes that the foreman would have fallen had not the rail stopped his staggering body.

Now the action went too fast for

interference, some of it too swift for the eye to follow. It was one of those dramatic clashes that occur when strong natures meet in a contest for supremacy. Both men were used to settling a matter by physical violence, and they jumped to it at once.

Dermott made a draw of his .45 pistol, hammer coming back under his thumb, cocking by the weight of the weapon as it rose. Expecting that, Husky Marshal realized in the split second that he must shoot in self-defense; it was practically instinct, the speed with which he brought out his plain-stocked, blue-steel Colt. There was no time to get a drop, Dermott's gun muzzle was rising to kill him.

MARSHAL'S six-gun roared an instant before Dermott's, though the reports seemed joined. Dermott's bullet hit the dirt in front of Marshal's wide spread boots, while the foreman folded up in the dust.

Frank Harrison shouted hoarsely. Marshal whirled on him, pistol ready in case the dude dared draw the fancy .32 toy that rode so neatly in a shiny holster at his waist. Seeing Husky Marshal's deliberate drop, Harrison froze and fear crossed his black eyes.

"Sorry, ma'am," Marshal said to the young woman without taking his eyes off the dude. "I had to do it. He aimed to kill me."

"Yes, that's so," she replied tonelessly—her hands tightly clenched on her rein. "Our foremen sure do have bad luck," she added. She was measuring Marshal with her eyes.

Men came from the saloon at the shots. Dermott was picked up, unconscious, a slug through the hip, and hustled down the road to the doctor's.

"This man shot down Dermott," Harrison cried suddenly. "It was murder. Call the sheriff and arrest him."

"Wait!" ordered Georgia North. "I saw the whole thing. Dermott drew first. It was self-defense."

"Thanks," Marshal said.

Frank Harrison shrugged, tagged along after the crowd to find how badly Dermott was hurt.

"If you want, you can ride out to the ranch with me," Georgia said to Husky, "that is, provided you've plenty of nerve left." She swung and trotted away.

Marshal, reaching for Buck, swept the saloon porch with his eyes before mounting. It was a simple precaution, for he did not know how many friends Dermott might have. One man still remained on the porch, having failed to follow the crowd to the doctor's. It was the huge Mexican who had been dealing cards inside. His pearl-white teeth were bared, and he had one hand on his barrel hip.

Grinning at Marshal, peaked sombrero cocked over long black hair and dark face, dandy's mustache on his curled lip, he made an imposing picture. Across the chest that bulged like a bear's, were two crossed bandoleers, gold-filagree six-guns in the holsters. He had fancy trimmin's on his satin vest and down the seam of expensive pants, tucked into large but comparatively slender calfskin boots, ran little gold jingles. Seeing Marshal's eyes upon him he grinned.

"Nice work, Beeg Senor," he said with slurring, soft accent. "A dead shot. You are queeck, *si?*"

"Yessir," admitted Marshal measuring the Mexican in his eyes. He seldom met men larger than himself but the Mexican was both taller and heavier. "Yuh ain't a pard of Dermott's, are yuh?"

"No, no, oh, no—nozzing like that! How would you like a job, riding for me, eh? Good pay, seventy-five per month."

"Much obliged," replied Marshal, "but I think I've got one awready."

"Maybe later," the Mexican cried shrugging his shoulder. "Good luck to you, Beeg Senor."

"Thanks," Marshal replied. "I shore need it."

He maneuvered Buck so his back would not be to the giant Mexican, and then galloped swiftly off after Georgia North.

It was a two hour ride out to the

Circle Star, southwest of the town. Georgia had little to say; she was downcast. And Husky Marshal was not a man to make idle talk.

At first sight the Circle Star seemed a great, living spread, but as they rode closer Husky's trained eye caught signs of neglect. Corral fences had been broken and were not repaired as they should have been. There was not the air of activity there always is around a big ranch.

The rambling houses lay in a grove of cottonwoods and aspens, watered by springs from which trickled a small brook. An atmosphere of dreariness hung over the place. There were no shouts of busy punchers, no jokes flying back and forth. An old wrangler, lounging in the shade, came to take their ponies.

Dismounting, Jack Marshal followed Georgia to the ranchhouse. On the porch, in a worn rocking-chair, sat a middle-aged man, hair grey around his temples. His pale blue eyes stared out across the acres of the vast ranch.

"Hello," he called. "Did yuh have a nice time in town, Georgia?"

"Yes, Dad," she replied in a low, soft voice. "I've brought back a young man who wants a riding job with us. Dermott started a fight with him, Dermott drew on him and got shot for it."

"My name's Jack Marshal, Mister North," said Husky, holding out his big hand.

He was chilled as the rancher's lips set, and North stared at Marshal, but did not accept his hand. Husky felt a hot flush creeping over his neck as he let his ignored hand fall.

Had it been any other place than the Circle Star the snub would have sent him riding away. He thought North was angry because his foreman had been shot. But the kindness with which North immediately addressed him surprised him; he suspected for a moment it was sarcasm and looked down at his boots.

"Plenty of work for a real man around here," said Lew North. "Yuh ever had experience handlin' a big spread, Marshal?"

"Yessir. I've been a foreman, in South Texas."

"So yuh're a Texas man, huh? Well, we can do with a few. By the way, before we hired Dermott, our foreman was an hombre named Banny Wilson, who done right well while he lasted. He come from Texas. Did yuh know him?"

"Banny Wilson?" Husky drawled. "Why, no, can't say as I do."

"'Did,' yuh should say, for he's dead. But yuh're hired, Marshal. I can trust Georgia's judgment. Fifty a month and found. Look things over and when yuh're ready to take holt, come back and we'll have a real powwow." He waved his hand in dismissal.

Marshal nodded, said thanks, and left the porch. Georgia followed him, caught up to him as he neared the bunkhouse.

"I should have told you," the girl said in a low voice, "my Father is blind."

CHAPTER II

A Funny Spread

"SHORE is a funny spread," mused Marshal to himself that night after supper. He lay in his bunk, lashes shading his eyes, watching through them the half dozen punchers who had ridden in off the range.

They made a sullen crew, shifty-eyed fellows who had just silently stared at him as Georgia announced that Marshal was their new boss. His short talk had failed to bring more than faint, half derisive smiles. Later on he noticed that the dude, Harrison, returning from town in the late afternoon, had told them about the shooting of Dermott. The latter was reported to be out of the combat for at least two months.

Marshal finally dropped off to sleep. When he woke at dawn there was a knife stuck over his head, and, pulling it out, he looked curiously at it.

"Who done that?" he growled.

One of the men, pulling on his boots across the shack, stared at him, then laughed.

"Who knows?" he drawled.

Marshal shrugged. Probably, he decided, some of them having a game with the new boss. He let it go at that, for to show he was riled would be bad for discipline. After breakfast he ordered the men to go on with what work they had been doing, intending to ride around and give the ranch a thorough examination.

THE sun was still rosy red as he forked Buck and began to inspect the inner sections of the Circle Star. There were plenty of steers with the brand on grazing around, but Marshal's trained eyes noted few that were immediately marketable. Many were too old, others were young stuff. It would be a couple of years before the Circle Star could hope to make a sizable shipment, if the samples he saw represented the thirty thousand head it supported.

He did not ride far but returned around eleven to the houses. Georgia North, dark hair neat under her Stetson, was leaning on the rail of the horse corral as he rode up and dismounted.

"Howdy," Husky called.

She turned to him. Her lips, full and red, moved but he scarcely heard her greeting. There was still that sad, haunted look on her face.

"A smile," he observed aloud, "would go good on that pretty face, Ma'am."

She did not give it, but looked away. The droop of her slim figure worried him, made him feel sad, too. He stepped to her side, towering over her.

"I'd sure like to make yuh laugh. Yuh're just a kid. Yuh shouldn't be so down. I ain't complainin' yuh treat me coldlike, but only wonder why yuh got me here and yet seem set against me?"

She fixed her eyes on his. "I've nothing against you, of course not. I—" She broke off, shrugged.

"Tell me what's wrong," he ordered. He was worried for a moment, thought she meant to cry and nothing embarrassed a man so much as a weeping lady. "Tell me," he said again.

"I'm scared," she whispered.

"Of what?" he demanded, taking her hand in sympathy.

"I don't know exactly. That's it. I just feel it. Our outfit's rapidly going to pieces, everything seems to be wrong.

"Money is very low; we're missing most of our marketable cows. Two foremen have been shot. Yet, there's nothing you can lay your hand on. For instance, I *know* you shot Dermott in self-defense. Yet he was put out of commission."

"Huh," he growled. "Tell me, yore paw said yuh had an hombre named Banny Wilson here as foreman, ahaid of Dermott. What happened to him?"

"Nobody knows, for sure," she answered.

"Mebbe he jest rode away."

"No. His pony came home, blood soaking the saddle, though the body never was found. You should have been told all this before we hired you. But I think you'd have taken the job anyway."

"I would, and I'll keep it. Can't yuh give me somethin' to shoot at, some guess? Yuh must have a hunch what's wrong."

"I haven't. I can't figure it."

"Anybuddy aimin' to force yuh out, buy yuh up cheap?"

"Not that we know of. This ranch is worth plenty with its water. There are mineral deposits in those southwest hills."

"Mebbe that's it, gold, silver?"

"No. Iron, and cheap ore at that."

Marshal asked a question which had been bothering him. "And exactly who's this Harrison dude?"

"Oh, a distant cousin of ours, staying with us a while. He had a breakdown in New York and came West to recover."

"Shore he's okay?"

"Yes. He wrote before he came, we expected him when he drove from the railroad. He has letters of identification, marked bags, what could

Gasca

he have to do with running our ranch down?"

"Dunno—"

Harrison, in riding clothes, clipped mustache on his upper lip, shiny boots with silver spurs, came toward them. "Oh, Georgia. Coming to ride?"

Husky realized he still held her hand. Both did at the same moment and the girl flushed, quickly let go. She hurried to Harrison, and Husky heard him scolding her.

"Do you allow ordinary fellows like that to hold your hand?" Harrison asked her. Marshal watched them mount and ride. He shoved back his Stetson, rubbed his wrinkled brow.

"Yes, shore is a funny spread. That gal's a beauty. And that dude —why, he's crazy 'bout her!"

After a bite he went out again, riding southwest toward the purple mountains. He galloped fast across flat grazing land, slowing down as the rocky ground began mounting in cactus-trimmed ridges. Up high, he could observe the general contour of the land, and decided a rustler would drive stolen stock through certain passes.

"For," he kept saying aloud to Buck, between snatches of "My gal's a Lulu," "five thousand head of first-grade beef don't jest evaperate." He had shifted to his broad shoulders the Circle Star trouble.

A thousand feet up he looked back on the valley's immense sweep but could not yet see through the wooded high slopes of the southwest hills. But there were gaps through which cattle could be driven. He left Buck and climbed to a rocky ridge looking down over a wooded ravine.

A bullet struck a yard from his crooked elbow. It spattered bits of lead and flint against the bronzed line of his jaw and the half whistle, half drone it made in the hot air rang in his ears. He crouched behind a jagged rock. A moment later came the explosion, it focused his eyes on the broken slope opposite. He did not draw his six-gun, for

Husky Marshal

the range was too far. The bullet which had come close to him had been fired from a rifle.

The country between was too cut up for a horse. Marshal made his way to the bottom of the depression, across an arroyo draining the hills in wet seasons. Semi-desert plants, cactus and tough gramma grass, grew here.

Sometimes the cattle strayed into these draws but usually stayed on the north range where grazing was better. He started up the west slope and drew his pistol to have it ready. He was determined to solve the mystery of the Circle Star, if it was the

last thing he ever did — and, he mused, maybe it would be!

He came to the spot from which he was sure the shot had been fired. He had seen no one, though hidden retreat up and over a wooded razorback ridge would have been easy. The sun glinted on metal a few yards off and after a careful survey he approached. The shining object was an empty shell from a .30-30 rifle. It lay on a flat rock and held down a paper. Marshal glanced at it.

"Don't come too close. I won't kill you—yet," the penciled scrawl said.

He went to the top of the razorback. Scrub growth interfered with vision. The whole country beyond was bad, juggled crazily together. He had a brief glimpse of a rider on a great black pony. He hustled back to Buck, mounted and started in pursuit. He made his way south on the trail of the black.

Georgia

Now he was getting a good idea of the route through the mountains. Having passed the highest hills, he was descending, the country growing better for grazing. And after a long run rolling prairie dotted with thousands of steers opened out. Riding full speed, dust whirling from Buck's hoofs, yet Husky Marshal observed those many fat beeves and the water for them coming from a sizable stream.

His eyes narrowed, peering ahead at the speck he followed. Hot on the trail, he rode as the sun dropped to the horizon. Then he saw the walled *hacienda* with trees and gardens, near the stream. It was built of adobe, whitewashed so that it gleamed. He slowed Buck as he neared, riding around to the east side where a wide gate showed. No one seemed stirring inside but the horseman he chased had gone in, Husky had seen him swing around the high wall. Pulling up fifty yards from the invitingly open gate he uttered a warwhoop.

"Hey, in there," he bawled. He repeated his call, and fired his gun in the air. Night threatened to close in on him. Then he heard a shout from inside. "Help—help—Americans—" It broke off

A Mexican cowboy suddenly stuck his head around the gate. "What ees it, Senor?" he inquired.

"I want the man who jest rode in. Send him out."

The head disappeared. After a time the Mex reappeared.

"Capitano Gasca say please you come in, Senor. He weel like much to talk to you."

"Like hell I stick my head in that trap. Tell him either come out or I'll come back with the army."

A window in the house raised—the main quarters were evidently some twelve feet above the ground level. Marshal stared at the smiling

Harrison

face of the giant Mexican he had met in town.

"So, it's you," shouted Husky Marshal. "I thought I reckernized yuh on that hoss. Yuh tried to drygulch me back there."

"Come in, Beeg Senor," Gasca begged.

Marshal shoved Buck closer but was too wary to be enticed inside the gate. "Who was that I heard yellin' fer help?" he demanded vigorously.

"That was your eemagination, Beeg Senor," Gasca replied smoothly. "You know, I *might* have put that bullet into you, Marshal. But first I geeve you a chance. Why not come in, have a dreenck, and talk? Eet's import-ant, to you and to me."

"Yuh a friend of Dermott's after all?"

"Not 'specially. Dermott I do not like *mucho*. You, I like, would be sorry to see you die. I geeve you $100 per month."

"Nuthin' doin'," snapped Marshal, inhaling a deep breath. He was sure the giant Mex had something to do with the Circle Star mystery. He wanted to solve that and finish his own business, but—

Buck gave a nervous shudder, and Marshal whirled. Buck's warning saved him; armed men appeared at both ends of the high wall. A volley of shots tore past the spot where he had been; as Buck leaped backward under the rein, Marshal fired, and a man fell at the left. He put two into the massed men at the right, shot again at the left as Buck pivoted, and began to run, zigzagging. Lead whistled around them, a bullet scraped the man's Stetson and tore through the thick felt.

Out of range, he slowed, reloaded, and turned to stare at the *hacienda*. Gasca had tried to hold him while his men crept around to catch him. They were not through. In the dark, which had dropped over the earth, he heard Gasca's shouts. After a minute mounted gunmen swept from the gate and he turned, beat back for the north, conducting a running gun-fight.

Buck was too fast for the other ponies. At last Marshal was in the mountain passes and rode till he reached a twisting, narrow cut, where he made a stand, shooting down two of his pursuers' horses. They retreated, then, leaving him to return to the ranch.

It was very late when he arrived. The bunkhouse and ranchhouse slept. Marshal turned in, not in his bunk but in the haymow, where he slept till after dawn.

CHAPTER III

A New Crew

"LOOKS as though that big scamp who shot Dermott must have lost his nerve and run for home and mother!"

Lying in the hay, Marshal heard Harrison sneeringly refer to him. The dude spoke to Georgia, below the upper mow door.

"He's not been in his bunk," she said. "He's been gone since yesterday."

"Good riddance," the dude said. "I didn't trust him."

"Don't talk that way," she snapped. "He may have lost his pony. I'm going to ride out and see if I can find him."

Marshal rose, stuck his head from the door. "Don't bother," he grinned as Harrison turned a startled red face up. "I bunked here," he added, as Georgia's countenance cleared. "Guess Buck strayed down to the lower end of the pasture so yuh didn't spot him. Wait, I'll be right down." He descended the ladder, joined her.

Punchers lounged by the bunkhouse. Seeing Marshal they strolled over.

"Say, foreman," a cadaverous man with a wad of tobacco in his leathery cheek, growled, "today's payday."

Marshal glanced at Georgia, who flushed. He replied quickly, "Sure, Lanky, yuh'll git paid. Jest wait'll I visit the bank." He said in a low voice to the girl, "Could I speak to yuh, Ma'am?"

The slug tore through Gasca's chaps hitting the Black

Harrison horned in. "Coming for a ride?" he asked her.

"Business first," growled Marshal, shoving the dude's hand aside. He disliked Harrison and didn't care who knew it.

GEORGIA preceded him to the rear of the barn. He look at the worried face of the girl.

"How 'bout it. Is this payday?"

"Yes. But, we're out of cash"

"I see. Six of 'em, at thirty per. That's one hundred eighty dollars. So yore paw's busted."

"I'm afraid so. We've got the ranch and it's worth plenty, but we haven't shipped in so long we're out of money. We've got to meet five thousand dollars worth of payments in the next two weeks."

"Then we'll make a sale pronto, sell 'em on the hoof at the pens. Say one thousand at twenty per at Douglas."

"Where are you going to get a thousand marketable beeves? Our ranch is skinned, you must have seen that."

He winked. "I'll git 'em. But fust I'm payin' off these wuthless skunks Dermott took on. Watch me."

"But—we haven't the money!"

He flashed a grin and his easy assurance gave her new heart. She followed him as he strolled to the cowboys.

"Gents," he said, smooth as cream, "I'm payin' yuh as yuh hinted yuh wish. Here and now. I regret to state yore valuable services ain't required longer round these diggin's." He took a wad of paper bills from a pocket under his shirt. "Here," he said, passing thirty dollars to each. "I won't ask fer a receipt, but will take Miss Georgia's word yuh bin paid."

"Wait," growled Lanky belligerently, after receiving his money. "Yuh didn't hire us, Texas. Dermott did. We ain't takin' ridin' orders from nobuddy else but Mister North, owner of this spread."

"A saddle lawyer, huh?" growled Husky Marshal, hitching up his gunbelt ostentatiously.

Georgia spoke up. "Mr. Marshal's boss here," the girl said, "and if he says you're through, you're through!"

Lanky spat, sneered, and turned away. Husky watched them saddle up and head for Pleasant City.

"I'm follerin' 'em in, Ma'am," he said to Georgia smiling. "We'll need a new crew."

"Some of our old boys are still hanging around town. Dermott let them go and brought in men of his own."

"Dermott had the right idee, I'll do that myself."

He saddled up and headed for town. Arriving at the saloon a short while after Lanky and the disgruntled punchers, he strolled in and called for a drink. Lanky and his men bunched together at the other end of the bar, scowling at Husky Marshal, who airily ignored them, though he kept his weather eye on their gun hands. He spoke to the barkeep who indicated a round table where four cowboys played poker.

"They are still gamblin' their money," he said.

Marshal strolled over. They passed his close inspection and he spoke to them, ordering up drinks and sitting down. The four said they would be glad to work again at the Circle Star.

The five rode back toward the ranch. It was a beautiful day, a warm breeze rustling the gramma grass under the pony hoofs. He was satisfied with the four cowboys he had picked up. There was Montana Jim, a silent man of thirty, tall and weather-beaten, a crack hand with stock; Shorty, talkative and squat, a bald spot in the center of stringy brown hair; Yuma, a brash young fellow with two high-riding six-guns; and the natural leader of the quartet, one Pete, a handsome, dark-haired youth with a boy's open face.

"Yuh boys worked fer Banny Wilson?" asked Husky.

"Shore," Pete replied. "He was a swell hombre."

"What happened to him?"

"Dunno exactly. He was dry-gulched on the south range, I guess. Hoss come home all bloody. Things went bad then."

A mile from the town, riding slowly through rolling rises covered with mesquite, Marshal halted suddenly. He looked keenly about him.

"Watch it," he said suddenly and dropped his hand to his pistol. An instant later a bullet whirled within an inch of his head. He replied, as he glimpsed a horseman behind a clump of bush. A yip told him he had nicked his target.

"Draw and fight, boys," he shouted.

The command was superfluous as Pete and his men already had their six-guns going. Shots sent the ponies bucking and Marshal dug in his spurs, knocked down Buck's head, driving the horse forward as the rider poured lead into the ambush.

The dust grew thick as soup as the swift battle raged. Pete and his mates followed Husky Marshal in the charge. Getting behind the mesquite used as cover by the enemy, Marshal saw Lanky and the others he had fired off the Circle Star, already in retreat. A wild burst of firing came back, but they were on their way. They hurled back lead and curses. Marshal did not trail them long but swung Buck.

"This is gittin' interestin'," he drawled. "Seems like I'm none too welcome in these parts. C'mon, let that scum go. We got a job to do pronto. We'll pause at the ranch, then head for the south."

ON the plains south of the ragged hills it was easy pickings for Husky Marshal, with Pete, Yuma, Montana Jim and Shorty, to round up a thousand fat steers, each with a Circle Star brand on its hide, ready to market.

"That big Mex Gasca ain't even bothered to blot brands," observed Marshal to Pete as, sweat streaming off them, they paused on the flank of the bellowing herd. "I noticed our cows down here when I rode through before."

"This is shore enough Gasca's range. And here he comes now, hell-fer-leather, or I'm a rattlesnake's grandma."

Southeast an approaching dust sheen was in the air. The *hacienda* lay over there, invisible in the distance. The Circle Star's newest foreman was not much worried at the size of the mob following the giant Gasca; most were Mexes and Husky Marshal had had a sample of what Pete and his mates could do in a scrap. Gasca, seeing the five heavily-armed waddies as Marshal rode out with them at his heels, drew up. "Beeg Senor," he bawled, "what ze hell? You steal my cows!"

"Yuh're welcome to a peek at the brands on these critters, Cap," replied Husky Marshal mildly, one eye on the giant's gun hand. "Ev'ry one is Circle Star. Shore funny how come they all strayed down here through them passes. And ev'ry one ready fer the butcher, too! It's our priverlege to round 'em up so I'm takin' a thousand head. Nuthin's stoppin' me, neither hell nor high water."

"Wait. Why can't we talk thees over?"

"We can, pervidin' yuh don't talk too long." From the corner of his mouth Marshal added to Pete, "Jest keep an eye on the mob while I palaver with Gasca." He trotted Buck over.

Gasca looked him up and down. "I warn you," he said in a low voice, "you have no chance."

"No chance of what?"

"Of winning. Beeg Senor, I have been verree len-i-ent weeth you. For why? Because I like you. I said so, deedn't I? Eef you work for me you weel have good job, a hunderd a month, food, all the fine horses you weesh, Spanish strains that make your mouth wat-er. Eef not—"

"If not, what?"

"You die."

Staring into his adversary's dark eyes, Marshal was sure Gasca was not bluffing. There was something here that Marshal couldn't fathom.

"I'd shore like to know yore game," he growled.

"I want the Circle Star. I would take eet slow, weethout much fuss, but you have call my hand."

"I s'pose this is what happened to Banny Wilson," growled Marshal. "He wouldn't throw in with yore

schemes so yuh drygulched him, eh."

"He was frien' to you?" Gasca asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Oh, no—jest heard of him at the ranch."

"What you say?" Gasca asked, shrugging.

"I'm buildin' up the Circle Star fer the Norths, that's what I say. And from now on I'm shootin' straight at anybuddy tries to stop me. Savvy?"

"I savvy. *Adios,* then, Beeg Senor. See you in hell—where I'll arrive later." His teeth flashed as he swung his great stallion as though to ride back to his men. But it was a move to hide the draw of his gun.

Husky Marshal, starting to turn away, saw the slight tilt of the giant's shoulder as Gasca made his draw. Marshal fired from the hip, the slug tearing through Gasca's chap leg and hitting the black in the ribs. The stallion went down in a squealing pile of legs, Gasca's gun going off as he fell, but the aim was spoiled by the pony's crash. Beaten to the shot, Gasca roared in rage as he tried to kick out of his stirrups, but found his leg pinned under the stallion.

"Watch it, Marshal," bawled Pete, riding to him. There were thirty Mexes in that bunch and they started to fire. Bullets whirled past the Americans as they drew off, allowing the Mexicans to ride in to rescue their boss.

Marshal, on the flank of the cows, sent slugs back in reply to the heavy firing. The herd began to snort and move in alarm.

"Let 'em ride, boys," he bawled. He drove Buck toward the flank, forcing the cows to veer; they shoved on those ahead and the herd moved east, urged on by the whooping Americans.

Head down, the leaders charged. The oncoming cattle and the bullets sent the Mexicans in hurried retreat. Dust rose high and thick. Marshal knocked a Mex from the saddle in the swift exchange of lead as they passed the mob. The band from the *hacienda,* carrying the unconscious Gasca, rode swiftly south.

The steers roared on several miles along the easiest course, which was according to Marshal's wish. There was a railroad spur fifty miles northeast and a town with pens to receive cattle. At Douglas there would be a buyer to take the cattle off his hands.

The hills blocked the left flank of the herd, so the cowboys spent their time in the drag and on the right, pushing in strays, urging the cows out of Gasca territory.

Husky Marshal meant to have that money for the Norths when they needed it.

CHAPTER IV

Disappearance

WEARY, covered with dust from his very fast ride, Husky Marshal shoved Buck toward the Circle Star. A short way behind, strung out for a quarter mile, came the four punchers, unable to maintain the pace that Marshal set. They had been away three days and in Husky's belt was several thousand dollars to tide over the Norths.

There was no one in sight around the buildings. Husky, dismounting at the horse corral, shoved Buck through the gate. As he turned to the ranchhouse to locate Georgia and Lew North, he caught sight of the limp form on the bare earth near the hay barn. It was Old Tim, the wrangler, and he was dead, shot through the head.

Marshal bent over him, cursing. The old fellow was cold to his touch. Husky hustled to the ranchhouse. The door stood wide. Knowing beforehand he would receive no reply, he shouted. He went up and inside. The house was deserted.

The dead wrangler showed there had been violence. Pete and the others found Marshal closely looking over the ground outside the beaten space near the steps. There were many pony hoof-marks, fresh. Husky Marshal decided not many hours had elapsed since the raid. In

the grass he picked up a small silver bangle.

"Damn that dirty Mex!" he swore, looking up at Pete. "Gasca come and carried 'em off."

"Let's go down and tear 'em to pieces!" growled Pete.

"C'mon, check yore guns, boys. Yuh'll need 'em."

They took fresh mounts. "Now let's see how far we kin foller them tracks," ordered Marshal, usually good-humored face set in cold rage. He walked his pony out, away from the spot where he had found the Mexican bangle.

Marshal noted that the tracks split into two groups, and was about to choose the south since the larger bunch had gone that way, when his eyes were attracted by a brown object in the grass. It was a woman's buckskin glove, and was far enough along so he guessed the girl had been taken northward.

"This way," he ordered. "Ride now."

An expert trailer, he was able to stay on the sign. Two hours later, sun dropping on the horizon, he drew up. Pete found him dismounted, eyes close to the earth. "Funny," growled Husky, "there was a scuffle here, Pete, see? Two riders was in the drag and one suddenly busted loose and zigzagged behind them trees. The others fired at him but after follerin' him a way, they give up and went on north into them low hills right ahaid."

"Yuh're right," agreed Pete. "What yuh figger?"

"Dunno. We'll have to ketch up. It may not be much further." They shoved on, watching the trail and its sides. Passing through a thick clump of cottonwoods fringing the base of the hills, Husky suddenly clapped his hand over his horse's twitching nostrils. Pete and the others followed suit, to keep their ponies quiet.

"Did yuh hear that?" inquired Marshal as Pete rode up and stopped beside him. "A hoss nickered off through that gap. Quiet, now, dismount. Yuma, stick with the hosses and keep 'em still."

Husky led the way, climbing through the gap up a steep slope. Crouched at a turn, he could see ponies, held by one of Lanky's punchers. So they were in it! The disgruntled Circle Star gang had had a hand in this.

MARSHAL'S grip tightened on his gun butt. Intent, he heard voices beyond. The fellow at the horses was looking toward a spot from which the talk came. On tiptoe, Husky came within a yard of him before he swung, hitting him a clip with his left fist that smashed the waddy flat. His head struck a sharp rock which knocked him out.

Gun in hand, Marshal crept on. He directed the stealthy movements of Pete, Montana Jim and Shorty with his hand.

He slowed down as he was nearing the edge of a natural depression, peeking through scrub bush fringing the brink. Fifty yards off he saw in the dip Lanky and four hombres, sitting around Georgia North.

"Now looka here, Georgia," Lanky was saying, voice harsh, "we stood enough, savvy? That big galoot yuh hired had no right to fire us. We want justice, money to pay fer what's bin done!"

"You got your wages," she snapped angrily.

"That ain't enough," growled Lanky.

"You're murderers and thieves," she cried spiritedly. "You killed Old Tim, I saw you. And your friends the Mexicans took Father off. If anything happens to him I'll see your hide's ripped off."

Lanky seized her wrist, pulled her to him, grinned as he hugged her. "Yuh're a little devil, ain't yuh?" he cried.

The angry Marshal, six-gun rising with intent to send a slug through Lanky as soon as he could do so without risk of hitting Georgia, noted a movement on the other side of the hollow. He saw a brown hat, then Harrison's face, eyes on the group below. Lanky shook Georgia, then Mr. Harrison rose up and slowly drew a .32 pistol from its

holster, aiming in the general direction of Lanky.

"Put up your hands," shouted the dude fiercely.

The puzzled Marshal saw Lanky let go of the girl and quickly raise his hands. The four other supposedly tough hombres followed suit.

"Yuh got us," growled Lanky. "Dang yore hide, Mr. Dude."

"Come, Georgia," called Harrison. "Hurry up."

She went up the bank to Harrison. It would have been simple for Lanky or the others to draw and fire behind cover of her body but they kept their paws up. Husky Marshal scratched his head, letting Georgia get out of the range of the bullets he meant to let fly in the next few minutes. As soon as the dude had Georgia by him he dropped down with her out of sight.

LANKY grinned and lowered his hands. "That's that," Marshal heard him say. "Come on."

"And now," said Husky Marshal, six-gun hammer back under his thumb, "let's really do some reachin', gents."

The expression on Lanky's long face was funny to see as he stared up at Marshal. One of his men was rattled and tried for his gun. Pete, who was up beside Husky Marshal, fired, and the man crashed. Lanky uttered a shrill cry of terror, tried to draw. They evidently decided they were to be shot without mercy and they opened up with their pistols.

Marshal, wanting to get around on the other side and catch up with Georgia and the dude, had to stop and engage in the battle. It was some minutes before Lanky, a bullet hole in his gun hand, tears streaming down his cheeks, cried for quarter.

"Keep 'em here," Marshal ordered Pete. He rose and ran across broken ground fringing the slopes. He reached the other side of the hole and started down; below, among the trees, he saw Georgia and the dude as they mounted and started off. He shouted and fired a shot but they did not look back or pause; they believed it must be Lanky. Marshal decided he would find the girl later at the ranch and hurried back to Pete.

"What'll we do with this vermin, boss?" asked Pete.

"Tie 'em up and leave 'em to rot," snarled Husky. He glared at Lanky who sat on the ground holding his wounded hand. "Where'd they take Lew North?" he demanded.

"How the hell should I know?" growled Lanky sullenly.

Husky Marshal hit him and the thin man fell back. "I'm ridin', Pete," said Marshal. "Soon as yuh git these skunks hogtied, foller me to the ranch. If yuh kin git any information from these mutts, go to it."

He went down to the ponies, and, mounting, spurred after Harrison and Georgia, his mind burning with suspicion.

Husky Jack Marshal cursed the night that had fallen. He had once sighted, far ahead, dust he knew was raised by the hoofs of the ponies ridden by Georgia and the dude. It was ironical to think the girl was trying hard to escape from the man who wanted to save her. She thought it was Lanky and his gunmen after her. In the darkness Husky could not follow a trail without frequent stops, so he pushed on blind, sure they would head for the Circle Star.

But, arriving in the vicinity, he saw no light in the house. The place was deserted. Georgia and the dude had failed to stop there or had branched off somewhere back in the starry night. He cursed the delay which had prevented him from stopping her, kept blaming himself.

Far off, southwest, he heard a shot crack, then two more. He was almost sure he caught, very faintly, a woman's cry. He spurred that way, pausing again and again to listen for sounds that might guide him. He rode in wide arcs, pressing southwest under the milky sky.

The plains were pitted with holes, dark clumps of mesquite looking like sinister riders; nor was he well ac-

quainted with the country, having been over it only a couple of times. At last he found himself in the mountain passes and decided to press on alone. Had Georgia ridden to town she would be safe; should she return to the ranch, Pete and his men would later get there to help her. He was practically convinced Lew North had been taken by force to Gasca's.

IT was very late when he saw the white *hacienda*. He left his pony with dropped reins some distance out, checking up his guns as he crept in. The lower windows were set with iron bars, and were about twelve feet from the ground as the master's living-quarters were there. The basement was used as storage, bunk space and stables. Only one of the lower windows did not have a light in it. The high 'dobe side of the house, studded with the barred windows, formed the west wall, made a miniature fortress.

Flat in the dirt, close to the west side, he listened, sure he heard Gasca's voice. To his left was the one dark window, bars over it. Marshal wanted to get inside; he must try to find the Norths. He knew he would be a target in a frame if he climbed up on the sill of a lit window and he headed for the dark one.

Marshal found he could get his toes into niches and by sheer muscle pull himself up. He held to the thick bars, pressing against them. There were three of them, and he carefully raised himself to the top cross piece from which he reached a small upper window. This let him over a low parapet to the flat roof.

The young cowman started across, looking for a way down. If he could get a gun on that giant Mex, he might win the toss. His boot-heel sank in a small drain and he was held a moment, the noise he had made rang in his ringing ears.

The problem of how to get into the house was solved. A movement below sent him crouching in the rail shadows. The dark rectangle of a trapdoor rose quietly close to him and a man with a gun appeared and tiptoed across the roof. Evidently the sound Husky had made had alarmed him and he had come to investigate.

Marshal rose, reaching for the throat with his right hand, twisting the pistol away with his left. His steel-band fingers closed, stifling the man's cry. The fellow he had was a Mex, no match for the mighty foreman. It took Marshal only a moment to subdue him, knock him senseless. He tied and gagged him with his own clothes.

Urged on by a sense of impending tragedy, and calling forth the tremendous energy of his reserves, he went to the trap and down a short ladder into a small room. A candle burned on a table, there was a bunk, the belongings indicating the room was used by a servant. He lifted the latch of a door leading him into a long hall, empty. He tiptoed to stairs at the end of the corridor and listened. Plainly he heard Gasca's voice and a second man, Lew North, was replying.

He started down, Colt's blue-steel muzzle ahead, left hand out for balance. The lower hall was lit by one lamp at the far end. A panel of light streamed from a wide doorway halfway along. Husky was nearly down when a man began to shout and bang on a closed door a few feet from him through the banisters. He recoiled, crouched on the step, hoping the decorative Mexican mantillas draped on the banisters might hide him.

"Dang it," he muttered. "That'll bring the hull gang!"

"Let me out! Who's there? Help—"

Marshal pushed his bulk closer to the shawls as Gasca came from the wide door. The big man had a bandage on his face. He limped, too. He wore fancy house clothes, velvet pants and slippers, silk shirt with red scarf. His dandy's mustache worked in anger at the racket. Another Mexican, armed with pistols and knife, hurried from a door leading to the outside stairway into the *patio*. He joined Gasca right below

Marshal and they started for the door from which the racket came.

"Shut heem up," snapped Gasca. "Pronto, Pedro, you fool!"

Pedro the guard ran to the door, bolted it from outside.

"Yankee peeg, quiet," he cried.

"You have no right to keep me here, let me out!" Husky glimpsed the pale-faced youth who tried to push past Pedro.

"Back, back!" snarled Pedro.

The prisoner hit him angrily, if weakly. Husky Marshal realized this must be the man he had heard calling, the time he had made his brief, flying visit to the *hacienda*. It was impossible to guess who the prisoner was; he had never seen the man before. In rage Gasca hurried to the noisy captive.

"Eef you do not shut up, I smack you," he said.

"Look here, I want to know what right you have in holding me," demanded the young fellow.

"Thees ees always right," snapped Gasca and drawing back his huge fist, poked it into the other's pale face, knocking him back into the dark jail room. "Go tie hees hands and gag heem, Pedro," he growled, "he mak' too much noise."

Lew North came from Gasca's room, hands stretched before him, feeling his way. It was pitiful to watch the blind man trying to escape, to put up some sort of fight. Gasca, swinging from the door into which Pedro had disappeared, fixed his gaze on North as the rancher tiptoed for the exit. The big man shrugged, went and took North's arm.

"Back," he said, not unkindly. "You cannot get away, Senor North. My men are theeck as fleas. Eef you leesten to reason, you will not be hurt."

"Yuh'll never get my property, Gasca."

Husky Marshal, pistol butt tight in his sweating palm, waited, hoping to get some hint of Georgia's whereabouts; evidently she was not with her father, in that room.

"Weel you not sign the ranch to me, and feenish the matter?" asked Gasca, piloting North back into his room.

"No, sir! Never!"

Pedro, the guard, having finished tying up his prisoner, came, relocked the jail door. Gasca shoved North into a chair. "Seet down, Senor," the Mexican's voice was soft and menacing, "I will now see how long you keep sayin' 'No!' I have somethin' I save for you. Pedro," he called, "breeng the senorita and the one weeth her to me here."

"Si, senor don," replied Pedro.

Husky Marshal waited. The thick oak door to the *patio* banged behind Pedro. After a short time he returned, two armed men herding Georgia North and the dude Harrison before them.

CHAPTER V

Captured

HEAD high, Georgia North walked into Gasca's room. Husky Marshal heard her cry out when she saw her father.

Pedro and his two men stood in the hall, cigarettes hanging pendant from their wet lips. They did not seem concerned with what was taking place.

"Now, Senor North," Gasca was speaking, "weel you sign over the Circle Star to me? The price ees freedom for your girl and you."

"Our property's worth a fortune," cried Georgia. "Even if it is run down. Don't do it, Dad; this man's a criminal."

"Careful," admonished Gasca. "Keep out of thees, Senorita. Let men handle business matters."

"I'll sign anything if yuh let Georgia go!" cried Lew North.

"Good," Gasca replied. "All ees ready."

"What about me, Gasca?" cried Harrison. "Do I go free, too?"

"You pay me a ransom," the giant Mex said grinning.

"What'll you take to let us all go free?" asked the dude boldly. "And to let the Norths keep their ranch?"

"I must have the Circle Star. You

have not enough to pay me for that, so keep quiet, Senor Dude. Sign here, Senor North, eet ees a quit-claim deed to your ranch."

Husky Marshal decided the time had come to horn in. He did not know how valid a forcibly signed deed was, but if North and Georgia were found dead and Gasca turned up with such a document it might hold. He started downstairs and was almost at the bottom when Pedro chanced to turn and saw him. Pedro shouted an alarm and drew a gun.

The .45 had hardly cleared leather before Husky Marshal fired and sent Pedro screeching to the floor, with a slug through the shoulder. He lunged on, as the others dug for their irons. His second shot disabled the nearer man and, on top of the third, Marshal hit him with his left, knocking him down, kicking the pistol from his grip. Another boot, driven into the face, put the Mex out of the combat, and Marshal leaped into the big room.

"Reach, Gasca!" he yelled.

The giant, gun out, swung and saw Marshal. North sat at a heavy desk-table in the center of the ornately furnished room, Gasca close to him. A lamp burned on it. Gasca was too close to North for Marshal to fire from his position so Marshal jumped around to take a better bead. Harrison began to yell.

"DROP that gun," ordered Marshal, menacing Gasca; he intended to seize the chieftain and use him as a hostage to get clear. The windows were barred, and the armed followers of Gasca already were streaming into the hall from the *patio*.

The action was swift. Gasca saw why Husky dared not fire, and he moved nearer to North. He fired and his slug burned Marshal's ribs. The giant's head and shoulder stuck out, and Georgia screamed as Gasca took aim again at Marshal, who, knowing he must take a chance, fired once.

Gasca's heavy pistol clattered on the floor. Georgia stooped to pick it up.

"The hall's full of men, look out," cried Georgia.

Marshal swung, putting bullets through the open door, as armed Mexes came to aid their leader. Two went down, the others ducked for cover. The battle was going in Marshal's favor; he would seize Gasca, use him as a shield for the Norths and himself. Then suddenly Harrison fell very heavily against Marshal's back, knocking him off balance, putting him out of the action for the moment.

Gasca, hand bleeding from the slug Husky Marshal had sent, seized that instant to snatch the long knife at his side. An expert with a dagger, Gasca, white teeth showing in a snarl, bent a little as he brought his hand around to drive the knife at Marshal.

Unable to recover in time from Harrison's push, Marshal would have been stabbed had it not been for Georgia, who hurriedly fired the gun she had picked up, at Gasca. Her first swift bullet sent the big Mexican reeling and the knife clattered to the floor.

Gasca went tottering back, his heels struck the door-sill and he crashed, rolling out into the hall.

Harrison the dude was clinging frantically to Marshal. In fury, the foreman flung him violently away and Harrison landed in a heap outside. Mexicans seized him, and then dragged him away with Gasca, who was already out of sight down the hall.

"Keel heem! Keel that Beeg Senor," screamed the furious Gasca.

Bullets ripped into the room. Marshal jumped over and slamming shut the wide door, threw the bolt. Slugs began to patter against the panels but Marshal observed they failed to come all the way through. The thick wood stopped the bullets though the boards bulged inward. In the moment's breathing spell, Husky Marshal reloaded his six-guns.

"Shore sorry I lost Gasca," he growled. "I needed him."

"Can't we get out the window?" gasped Georgia.

Marshal shook his head. He knew they were prisoners.

"They got bars on 'em an inch

thick. This place is a reg'lar fort. How'd yuh come down here? Last I seen, Harrison took yuh away from Lanky and his crew, and yuh were headed fer the Circle Star."

"Was that you, following us?" she cried.

"Yes'm."

"Harrison said it was Lanky chasing us, and I believed him. We rode on, and Harrison said we'd better look around before we went to the ranch. South of it we were attacked by a bunch of Mexes. Harrison shot at them, but there were so many there wasn't much he could do. He did save me from Lanky."

"Huh," growled Husky. "Some savin'! I'm shore wonderin' a lot 'bout that dude. He ruint my plan of gittin' outa here jest now."

"The Mexes brought us down. I've only been here an hour or so."

"Yuh must've arrived jist 'fore I did. That dude's crooked, Georgia, I'm sure of it."

"He—asked me to marry him, after he saved me from Lanky," she confessed in a low voice. She flushed and dropped her eyes as Marshal stared at her.

"And what'd yuh say?" he drawled.

"I said I wouldn't, of course," she replied, a little impatiently. "I wouldn't marry a dude like him."

"And then, when yuh'd refused him after he'd played hero fer yuh, yuh run right into that Mex trap."

THERE was a crash of glass, followed by an explosion. A bullet rapped into the wall two inches from Marshal. He swung and with lightning speed put two slugs through the barred window, its pane now smashed. Men were up on the outside sill, trying to pick him off, but his bullets drove them away. He realized there were more at the other two windows and fired that way.

"Blow out the light," he ordered, "then they can't see us."

Georgia blew out the oil lamp. They waited breathlessly in the absolute gloom.

"Maybe," Lew North said quietly, "I better give 'em the ranch. I'd do anything not to have Georgia in danger."

"Never," she cried. "Husky'll save us."

Marshal scratched his head. Such confidence was very flattering, but he had no idea how he was to get a blind man and a girl out of there. To leave by the door meant death or capture and the windows were barred. He went to the nearest one and gripped the bars, trying to shake them but they were embedded in cement. The men outside saw him and fired. Slugs spattered on the sill and came through the opening, forcing him to duck.

"If I could hop out quick I might be able to drive 'em off," he growled, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his arm. The wounds he had sustained burned and stung, but his physical power was tremendous. "Tell me," he said, outstretched hand touching Georgia's arm, "jest how much do yuh trust that dude? He's shore made some mighty queer plays."

"He came to us from the East. I told you he had papers showing that he's a distant cousin. He wrote beforehand saying he was on his way." But she was not so sure of Harrison now as she had been when Husky first questioned her about him. "I don't see," she added, "what motive he could have in working with Gasca."

"I don't either. I've thought it over a lot, too. The way he saved yuh from Lanky and his rannies, that was enough to make anybuddy suspicious."

"Why?"

"Well, Lanky's no slouch on the draw, yuh know, nor are the hombres who travel with him. Yet they let that dude hold 'em up easy as pie with his toy pistol. Ma'am they stood lookin' hurt while Harrison got yuh away.

"Yet when Pete and me got the drop on 'em, they fought like cougars. After provin' to yuh he's as much a hero as any Western waddy, the dude asked yuh to hitch up to him. Yuh say no. Then by his advice yuh walk into a trap. And it

was Harrison who spoilt my play jest now. Yuh can't blame me for wonderin'."

"You're right. And I remember while we were coming down here, a Mex made a slip, he called Harrison 'Senor Boss.' Though still I don't see how one of Dad's relatives could have a hook-up with Gasca."

"Harrison's okay," North put in. "I knowed his paw well, we was pals together in the old days. His son *couldn't* be wrong."

Georgia suddenly coughed. "It's pretty close in here isn't it?"

Marshal sniffed the air, and coughed. "Smoke," he growled.

The smoke was coming through the broken windows. They could see the rolling vapor against the lighter sky. Georgia choked, her father was seized with a coughing fit. Marshal's eyes began to water and he fired at the windows but the smoke kept coming.

"Dang it, they'll smoke us out like a bunch of gophers," he growled.

"Guess they got us," Georgia said faintly.

"Give 'em the ranch and be done with it," Lew said anxiously. "If it was me I'd let 'em kill me, but I can't have nuthin' hurtin' my gal."

Marshal felt the same way. He would willingly die to save Georgia and the blind rancher, but he was aware that there would be more to it than simply passing the deed. Gasca would not turn them loose to tell a story of crime and coercion to the law. No, there would be death anyway for them, perhaps worse for her.

"Mebbe we better make a run fer it, out that door," said Marshal, between coughs. The heavy smoke was being fanned by blankets into the room from wet-wood fires built under the windows. It was only a question of time before the three would be forced out to face the guns of those in the hall or overcome by smoke.

Listening, Husky Marshal heard Gasca's voice. There were other noises, and one attracted him. It seemed close to his back. It was a dull thud against the side wall. He remembered the gagged prisoner who had been dragged into the next room. The sound of the thudding told Marshal that the partition must be thin.

"I got an idee," he said. "See if yuh kin find that knife Gasca dropped when yuh plugged him."

GROPING in the smoke, it was Lew North, accustomed to eternal darkness, who finally located the knife. He passed it to Husky, who at once attacked the wall. He found that as the heavy blade cut through the top plaster it struck thin partitioning and passed through.

Husky Marshal's great hand had the strength in it to carve a hole into the adjoining room, and he worked quietly as possible so as not to let Gasca know what he was up to. He had to feel what he was doing and they were all coughing miserably, eyes blinded.

At last he had a hole made some three feet high and two wide, big enough to squeeze through. He went first. The air was clearer, though a little smoke had drifted in. But it was not being forced into the room.

Husky Marshal helped Georgia and Lew North through, then felt around for something with which to block the hole and keep out the heavy smoke. His hand touched the end of a bunk along the wall he had cut and he felt a blanket, pulled at it. It would not come up till he gave it a hard jerk. A man uttered a muffled grunt close to his face and Marshal recoiled, then remembered that prisoner. He stooped and seized the man by the shoulders.

"Keep still," he whispered. "We ain't goin' to hurt yuh. If yuh want to escape, mebbe we kin take yuh with us."

Another grunt replied. Husky lifted him off the blanket and thin padding, and doubling the mattress up, stuffed the hole effectively.

"Don't make no noise," he cautioned again. "We mustn't let 'em know we're in here. They still think we're in the big room."

He felt for the prisoner's gag, removed it, keeping a hand ready to clap over his mouth in case the man

cried out. "Don't talk loud," he whispered.

"I'm with you." The man answered him in a stifled whisper. "I've been held here for weeks and want to escape. Who are you?"

"My name's Jack Marshal. I got some friends with me. Gasca's got us trapped, and he tried to smoke us out."

"He's a devil when he's angry. Untie my hands, will you?"

Marshal cut the rawhide from his wrists. He heard Harrison calling Georgia.

"Georgia! Come out, before the smoke hurts you," the dude begged. "I'm going to pay your ransom and your father's, too. Gasca has agreed to let us all go."

"What'll I do?" the girl whispered to him.

"I'll take the stuffin' out," Marshal replied, "and then yuh put yore head through and tell him yuh won't have nuthin' to do with him. We don't want 'em thinkin' we're knocked out and have them bust into that big room."

He waited while she answered. Then he went back to the prisoner.

"We're trapped here, mister. Them window bars are shore tough. If we could jest git through—"

"I got one loose," the man told him eagerly. "Been pickin' at it with a nail ever since they stuck me in here. Maybe you could bend it now."

"Show me it."

There were three upright bars. The middle one, loosened at the base by the prisoner, would allow them to squeeze between the others provided Husky Marshal could get it out of the way. He took hold of the bar's base and put his strength on it.

To his joy he felt it shake in his mighty grip.

The smoke haze and exterior noises were a help, hiding him as he worked. The muscles corded out on his tough flesh as he worked the bar back and forth. It was five minutes before the bottom wrenched from the socket. Panting for wind, feeling the smoke in his lungs, he rested a moment. Then he climbed up, stood on the sill, got hold of the bar at the base and began to lift. Slowly the thick bar creaked and then bent.

"Husky!" whispered Georgia excitedly. "Here they come. They're at the door."

Marshal let go the bar, jumped down, drawing his guns. He heard Gasca, right outside.

"*Si*," the Mexican said as the bolts were drawn, "we'd best get rid of heem now. The time has come. Open up, Juan."

JUAN, a fat Mexican, stood there, Gasca and other gunmen behind him. Husky Marshal fired and Juan fell with a shriek. Gasca roared as he leaped aside, and fired a quick one into the dark room. Marshal felt the whirl of slugs. He spaced bullets across the doorway, forcing the Mexes to move back out of sight.

"That Beeg Senor, he's in there," bawled Gasca. "Queeck, outside, and tell them to put the smoke into the small room!"

Marshal leaped over, slammed the door. He went again to the window, got up on the sill, seized the weakened bar and by a superhuman effort managed to pull it up.

"Help 'em up when I give yuh the word, mister," he told the young man who had been Gasca's prisoner, as he smashed the glass with his gun muzzle.

Then Marshal was out. He jumped, landing on soft dirt with bent knees breaking the fall. The smoke drifted thick, but the red glows of the fires showed up his huge figure to the watchers. The foreman was shooting two guns and most of the Mexicans were back from the wall to avoid shots from the windows. Marshal yelled back to his friends to come on.

He ran out a few yards, hoping to draw the mob away and give Georgia a chance to get out.

His sudden appearance surprised them and the Mexes yelled, firing wildly at him. He kept moving in a circle, putting lead where it did

the most good. His fury drove away the men, they scattered, looking for cover.

Marshal jumped to the house and called to them to hurry.

Lew North came first. Husky caught him as he dropped. Georgia started through the opening. Then the young man, still inside, gave a cry and Georgia screamed. Marshal saw her arms stretched to him, over his head; then she was snatched back out of his sight by the men inside.

Berserk, Husky Marshal tried to get back up to save her, for it was plain Gasca had come in and grabbed her. But the Mexes outside had re-formed and their slugs spattered the wall around North and Marshal, forcing the latter to turn and fight them off.

"Move along behind me, boss," he growled, guiding the blind man along the wall toward the corner. He intended to go back inside the *hacienda* and make a try at saving Georgia. As he neared the turn of the white wall, Lew North quietly obeying his orders, a new bunch of men sent by Gasca appeared, trapping them between two fires.

Husky Marshal's heart sank. He was cut off from the other side of the building and the first bunch was closing in, under that open window. He dared not leave North alone.

BULLETS sang about him, cutting clothes and puncturing his hide. He was bleeding profusely and aim was difficult in the smoky light, but he was not yet hit badly enough to be crippled. He swung his guns on those following him up; but the new gang then grew bolder. It seemed to be all over for him and North when war-whoops and shots from the northwest plain rang out.

Husky Marshal took new heart at those yells, for he recognized Pete's voice, and knew the waddies had followed him. The gunmen who had been holding him melted away like snow in the desert and the bunch at the end of the wall, seeing the reinforcements, faded back in the soft night.

CHAPTER VI

Bullets Fly

PETE, Montana, Yuma and Shorty sashayed up, smoking pistols in their hands.

"Gee, Husky," gasped Pete, breath fast from a run. "We shore thought there was a coupla armies fightin' here. After yuh left us I worked on Lanky a while and when I'd annoyed him plenty, he told me Gasca had brought Lew North here. We stopped at the ranch to wait fer yuh, and when yuh didn't show up we figgered yuh must've come down alone."

"Shore glad yuh're here. No time to gab now—they got Miss Georgia inside."

"Git her outa there," implored Lew North. "Don't bother with me. I'll lie quiet till yuh come fer me."

"Let's go," growled Marshal.

Guns loaded, the five waddies dashed around the square walls of the *hacienda,* for the front gate. Mexes were waiting for them, dim forms in the *patio,* flitting from cover to cover as the quintet charged. Guns roared hot and heavy. Yuma yipped, shifting his pistol to his left hand as his right went limp. Inside of two minutes they were in the compound, and the Mexes were running into the stables and through doors that they bolted after them.

Husky Marshal headed for the flight of outer stairs leading to the living-quarters. There was a locked door above. He put his gun on the latch and fired, threw himself against it. The door creaked and gave, catapulting Marshal and his men into the wide hall. Gasca's followers were waiting for them, and they opened a hot fire. Pete grunted, crashed on his face with a sickening thud. Marshal glimpsed Gasca among the mob, toward the inside steps, and the battle opened up.

The Mexicans could not stand before the fury of deadly lead the cowboys sent at them. Fearlessly, Husky and his men charged, whooping. Gasca, pinked himself, cursing

his followers for cowards, stood a moment too long. Marshal, lips set in a fierce grim line, took that instant to draw a careful bead on the giant, then let go his thumb. The hammer struck the pin and the big Mexican pitched forward on his belly.

The fall of their leader routed the Mexes; they scattered in all directions and the battle was suddenly done. Marshal stopped to bend over Gasca, saw the hole, as he rolled him over, where his slug had hit Gasca close under the heart. Bleeding from a dozen wounds, Husky Marshal leaped to his feet and gave orders to his three remaining punchers. The Circle Star waddies raged through the big house, calling for Georgia North.

The girl was no longer there. In the prison room they found the young man who had been held so long by Gasca. He was unconscious with a lump large as an egg on his head where he had been buffaloed by a gun barrel. They hunted through the great *hacienda,* shouting to Georgia, but there was no reply. They found no trace of her and Harrison, the dude, had also disappeared.

"Harrison must've took her out with him," was Husky Marshal's only comment.

"Hey, Husky," cried Montana Jim. "Gasca's still alive and he's askin' fer yuh."

MARSHAL strode to the Mex, who lay dying on the floor. Pete whom they picked up and examined, was shot through the thigh and they laid him on a bunk in a side room. Gasca's liquid eyes rolled in anguish, teeth gritting, blood flowing from his mouth.

"Beeg Senor," he gasped, as Marshal knelt by him. "Beeg Senor, you win. I am sorry—you would not work for me, then I would have won. Magee, he was really boss of thees business. Savvy?"

"Magee?" growled Husky. "Who the hell's Magee?"

"You know—that dude, Harrison!"

"He's got Miss Georgia. Where'd he take her? How 'bout tellin' me and doin' a last good turn?"

"He take her to the railroad—I theenck. Along the mountains—the way you drove the steers. He loves her—ees determine' you weel not have her. He means to marry her and win the Circle Star. The syndicate—Magee ees head of eet. He—" Gasca grimaced in awful pain.

"Who murdered Banny Wilson?" demanded Husky.

"You mean—he who was foreman of the Circle Star? I shot heem from the saddle and capture' heem. Magee, I mean the dude you know as Harrison, did not like heem. Magee shot Wilson in the back, feenished heem—" Gasca broke off as a spurt of blood choked him. He rose to a sitting position, then his head fell limp on his breast, face twisting. His spine flexed and he crashed in a death heap.

"Yuma," Marshal said calmly looking downward at the dead Mexican, "I want yuh to take charge here, clean things up. Watch out fer Lew and Pete and make sure that young feller in there is okay. I'm ridin'."

"Not alone," objected Yuma.

"Yeah, alone. Yuh can't be left with no help here, they might come back and git yuh. Pete's got to be watched as well as the other two. *Adios.*"

Marshal hurried out into the soft night. The stars whitened the heavens. Badly battered, weak from loss of blood, wounds aching, he found his pony. Guns freshly loaded he headed east over the plains.

Ruby dawn was lighting the sky as Husky Marshal, done in from forty-eight hours without rest, drove his tuckered horse up a slight rise. The land opened out before him and far ahead he saw two dark specks. With a deep intake of breath he knew his enemy, the dude, and Georgia were in sight.

The man was responsible for the Circle Star trouble, the death of

Banny Wilson, for kidnaping and murder. He had worked like a sneak, pretending friendship for the Norths while he plotted to ruin them. It was he who had enlisted Gasca's powerful forces in ruining the Circle Star.

FATIGUE consigned to the background, Husky drove in spurs, made his weary horse put everything it had left into that last dash. He was within five hundred yards before Harrison looked back over his shoulder and saw him coming hell-for-leather.

Georgia slumped in her saddle, hands tied to the horn. Harrison had been leading her pony and the loss of pace caused by this arrangement had enabled Husky to overtake them by hard riding. The dude let go the lead reins, and, unshipping a rifle from a saddle sling, put the weapon to his shoulder and pulled the trigger. Marshal heard the singing screech of the steel-jacketed bullet as he galloped swiftly into pistol range.

Harrison shot again, lower this time. Only a hundred yards off, Marshal felt the terrible lunge his mount gave. He threw his feet from the stirrups and managed to clear them as the beast fell under him. Then he came up on his knees, six-gun leveling off, as he let go the pronged hammer, and his pistol boomed.

Harrison was reaching for Georgia's rein, hoping to ride away and leave Marshal stranded. But the big foreman was determined not to lose out after getting so close. He fired three shots quickly and Harrison had to leap from his staggering horse. The dude threw himself down behind the pony's body, and, eyes shining with desperate fear, tried to draw an accurate bead on Marshal, but the foreman's bullets kept him twitching back.

A rifle slug tore within an inch of the fast moving Marshal's head. Georgia's horse stood, stepping away nervously from the shooting. Almost at the end of his endurance, Marshal's teeth gritted together; he knew he was going to get his opponent, the man he hated.

"You'll never have her, damn you!" the dude screamed suddenly and swung his rifle on Georgia.

He was within three yards of her, when Marshal sent a quick shot at the dude's flank as Harrison pulled his trigger. Marshal saw her body shift and move as Harrison's slug struck. Her pony leaped high, and ran wildly for about fifty yards, before it began to stagger.

Georgia was thrown over his head, though her hands still remained fastened to the horn. In a maddened, bloody miasma, Marshal saw her dragging in the dirt; then he shot at her pony to prevent her being cut to pieces by jagged rocks. His .45 slug took the horse under its eye and the animal collapsed in his tracks.

Burning with hot fury, heart thumping, Husky Marshal rushed at the dude, oblivious to the wild bullets Harrison was pumping at him. His charge in the face of death rattled the dude. In panic, as Marshal crashed forward, the dude threw away his rifle, leaped to his feet. Curses spat from his lips as one of the foreman's slugs creased his shoulder. He ran across the flats. Black revenge in his heart, Marshal bellowed after him.

"Stop or I'll kill yuh!" roared Husky Marshal, his own voice thundering in his ears, and pounding blood from his hard-worked heart. Only a man with a giant's constitution such as Husky Marshal's could have kept on.

The dude, foreknowledge of death in his glaring black eyes, turned, for he could hear Marshal's thudding steps close at his heels. Harrison had drawn his .32 revolver, and he pulled its trigger with Marshal not three yards away.

Still coming in, Marshal felt the lead sting agonizingly in his ribs; he staggered but recovered, releasing the hammer of his Colt six-gun.

The dude was half-turned to shoot; at the impact of the heavy .45 bullet, Harrison was spun like a top, confusion twisting his face. His eyes were glazing as he fell on his face, rolled over, and then lay still.

Wiping the blood from his eyes, Husky staggered to him. The dude was dead, a bluish hole in the right temple. Marshal cursed him as he walked unsteadily toward the prostrate figure of Georgia North. She was still hitched, by a rawhide thong, to the crumpled form of the dead pony.

Montana Jim, riding with Lew North and the pale-faced young prisoner from Gasca's *hacienda,* found Husky Jack Marshal slumped over with his back against a dead horse. The young giant held Georgia's limp head in his lap. For a moment the riders believed them both dead. High in the sky black specks of vultures showed, ready to plummet down for a feast.

Then they heard a low sound, the girl moaning. Husky Marshal was asleep, utterly worn out. Lew North, hearing his girl's wounded cry, swore and found his blind way to her, and ran his fingers over her face. Marshal woke suddenly, trying to reach his six-gun, laid on the sand beside him.

"Don't yuh tech her," he shouted, and then, realizing who it was, his white teeth gleamed in a welcoming smile.

"She ain't hurt so bad, boys," Lew North cried relievedly. "Thank heaven fer that. Jest wounded. I kin tell, even if I am blind."

He had dozed off as he kept vigil over the wounded girl. A drink of whiskey gave Marshal a little new power.

"What—happened to Pete?" he asked Montana Jim huskily.

"We figgered we better git him to the Circle Star and a doc quick as possible. So Yuma and Shorty rode him back. North, Harrison and me come after yuh," explained Montana, wiping dust and sweat from his red face.

Husky stared at the young man who was with the two Westerners. A frown furrowed his scarred brow, plastered with bloody sweat.

"Harrison?" he repeated. "Is that yore handle, Mister?"

THE erstwhile prisoner of the *hacienda* wore Eastern pants, a shirt that had once been white, a cowboy hat obviously borrowed. Though he had strapped on a holster and six-gun he was plainly as much of a dude as the dead man lying off among the rocks.

"Yes, I am Frank Harrison," he replied. "I'm a cousin of Lew North."

"Then that dude we knowed as Harrison was a faker," Marshal asked harshly.

"That's right," horned in Montana Jim. "Seems like Magee—that's the daid dude—done picked up this young feller on the train near our station. He offered to fetch Harrison to the Circle Star, savvy? Instead he run him to Gasca's, where he was made a pris'ner. That dude is Magee, he took all of Harrison's papers and belongin's and drove in a buckboard to the Circle Star, posin' as the hombre they expected."

"I savvy," cried Husky Marshal. "That explains it. There must've bin a spy amongst the punchers who told Gasca and Magee there was a visitor expected from the East. So Magee done took Harrison's place. And Banny Wilson—"

"Yuh're shore all-fired interested in Banny Wilson," observed Montana Jim. He was evidently curious about Marshal's connection with the dead ex-foreman of the Circle Star.

"And why not?" Husky replied. "He was my half-brother and we rode together fer years. One day he left and rode west. I heard he was foreman of the Circle Star, and then a rumor come he'd been murdered. Me'n him was closer'n brothers, so I rode to these parts to take it out on whoever kilt him. I was quiet 'bout it because I didn't want the murderer to know I was on his trail."

"Yuh got yore revenge," drawled Montana. "But—kin yuh explain why this here Magee worked so quiet-like? After all, he had Gasca to help him and worked Dermott and his gang in at the ranch. Why didn't he kill Lew and take things over by force?"

Marshal shrugged as he rolled and lit a cigarette. "Mebbe they intended to. But it's plain Magee went sweet on Miss Georgia. They drygulched Banny 'cause they had to have a foreman they could boss. Dermott come to the ranch at the right moment and was took on. Gasca's men run off the marketable beeves, Dermott lettin' him do it. When they had Lew North pushed to the wall they could buy him out for a few dollars."

"That's right," put in the real Harrison. "I heard a lot of talk through that prison wall while I was held at the *hacienda*. They mentioned a syndicate. Magee was head of it, and Gasca was in it too, with several of his pals.

"They wanted control of this whole section of the State and were determined to get it at their own price. If they pulled much rough stuff, they knew the law would step in and uncover them and they figured on cornering the beef market and cleaning up a fortune.

"Magee kept telling Gasca not to hurt Georgia, he was in love with her and later hoped to marry her and in that way get control of the Circle Star, but Marshal forced them into the open. Gasca had a weak spot for Marshal, he thought he could buy him over."

"And Magee wanted Miss Georgia to think he was a hero, so she'd admire him," put in Husky Marshal.

"Shore," agreed Montana. "Lanky said somethin' 'bout that. They hit the Circle Star with the Mexes while we was away with that herd. Gasca's men took Lew to the *haci-*

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

See whether you can savvy the answers to these five questions that test yore knowledge. If yuh cain't corral the replies, look at page 129—but DON'T LOOK FIRST.

1. What Westerner was called the "Colossus in Buckskin"?
2. Who was Miss Martha Jane Canary?
3. Where did Arkansas get its name?
4. Who was Chief Rain-in-the-Face and for what is he famous?
5. What are the names given to the wild horses of the Southwest?

enda while Lanky carried off Miss Georgia and Magee—they let Magee 'escape' on the way to the hills, then Lanky insulted Miss Georgia and Magee popped up and saved her."

"But," Husky Marshal said, "she wouldn't have him fer anything. So Magee then give the signal and led her into another trap, had her brought to Gasca's. He meant to have the ranch one way or another, if he had to kill North and keep Miss Georgia a pris'ner."

"Let's quit talkin'," said Lew North, "and fetch Georgia to the ranch. The doctor'll be there tendin' Pete and he kin look her over."

HUSKY MARSHAL, after a sleep, clad in clean clothes and with his big body swathed in bandages, strolled into the living-room. The blind rancher sat in a chair by Georgia.

She smiled at Marshal. The bullet fired at her by Magee in his mad-dog rage had slashed through the flesh of her hip and gone on to wound her horse. Though weak, she felt better this bright morning.

Marshal took from his belt the money received for sale of the Circle Star cows and handed it to Lew.

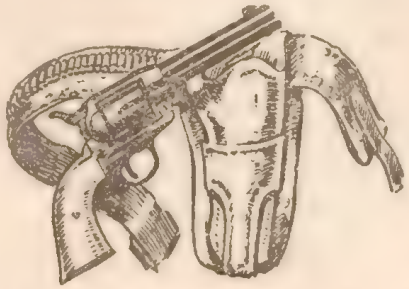
"I'll go down and round up all yore stolen beeves 'fore I pull out fer Texas," he offered.

"Thanks," Lew said. "This'll save us. Yuh've shore earned yore pay. But why yuh talkin' of leavin'?"

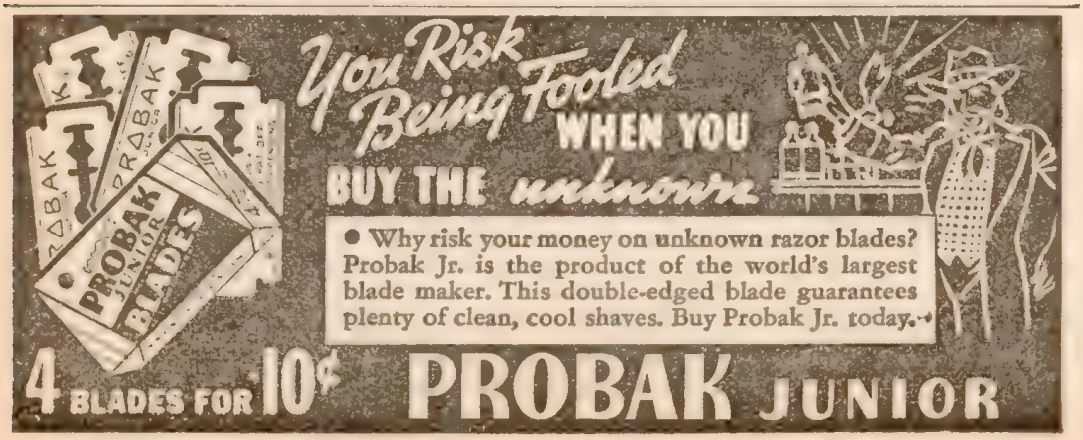
"Well," replied Marshal, eyes dropping, as Georgia's fixed his with a troubled look, "I quit a good job to come over here and find out 'bout Banny. Now yuh're straightened out, and mebbe yuh'd ruther hire a new crew—though I could stay if yuh want me."

"Shore we do," cried Lew. "Why Georgia jest now said she didn't see how she'd got along without yuh. Ain't it so, Georgia?"

Husky took the hand she held out; she didn't have to say anything more to tell him he was wanted.



In Next Month's Issue: HELLFIRE TRAIL, *a Novel of Rustling Renegades by* FORBES PARKHILL—*and Many Other Stories by the West's Most Popular Authors*



Six-Gun Grab

At that instant Arnold fired twice

A Cryptic Message Points the Way to Savage Revenge When Tim Kay Finds His Pardner Face Down in His Own Life-Blood!

By G. A. WELLS

Author of "By Proxy," "A Cure for Toothache," etc.

IN the light of a lamp on the wall above the cookstove Andy Fulton was preparing himself a late supper of fried bacon and eggs, soda biscuits and stewed apricots, and coffee, a meal guaranteed to satisfy any man, even one as hungry as Andy was then. He stooped to open the oven and have a look at the biscuits. As he did so he heard the kitchen door hinges squeak and footsteps behind him.

"Back a'ready, Tim?" he called over his shoulder without turning to look at the newcomer. "Didn't figger yuh to git back afore day atter

t'morrer. I'll put on some more bacon an' aigs in a minute. How's things in town?"

"Ever'thing's finer'n frog hair," the other man replied.

LIKE a shot Andy came erect and wheeled to find himself staring into the black muzzle of a six-gun that bore straight at his heart. The lips of the man holding the gun were curled in a hard, malignant smile that perfectly matched the venom that showed in his greenish grey eyes.

At that moment Andy felt as he imagined a trapped rat would feel. He sent a swift glance at his gun reposing in the holster attached to the cartridge belt hanging on the back of a chair all of ten feet away. The other man noted the glance and laughed derisively.

"So near an' yet so far, eh, Fulton?" he taunted. "I looked in at the winder afore I come in an' seen yore gun a-hangin' over there outa reach."

"Yeah, I reckon yuh did, or yuh wouldn't of come in so brash thataway," retorted Andy sourly. "Yuh prob'ly would of skragged me through the winder."

"Yeah, I reckon so."

"Hombres like yuh allus has to have a big edge afore they cuts any capers. What yuh want here, Arnold?"

"I kin show yuh better'n I kin tell yuh," was the answer. "Ain't no use wastin' my breath a-tellin' yuh what yuh already know. Whyn't yuh an' yore pardner git the hell outa this country an' go back to Texas where yuh belong like yuh was told to?"

Andy delayed his reply. He didn't expect a miracle to happen but sincerely hoped that one would, for only a miracle could do him any good. The miracle he hoped for was that Tim would arrive, though in his heart he knew there was slight chance of that.

Andy didn't try to minimize the peril of the situation. He knew full well that he was sitting in a game with all the cards stacked against him. He sent another longing glance at his gun and cursed himself for his carelessness. Still, he reflected, even if he had been wearing the gun the result would have been the same; for, as he had suggested, Arnold would have shot through the window.

"Whyn't yuh git out like yuh was told to?" repeated Arnold harshly.

"Well, I'll tell yuh," replied Andy, drawling the words to gain time while a part of his brain tried to devise ways and means out of the predicament. "It's thisaway, Arnold. Tim an' me likes it here first rate in Wyoming.

"A long time we honed to git started in the cattle business for ourselves, so when we got word from a friend of our'n up this way this place was for sale we come along up an' bought it."

"My boss wanted to buy it," growled the other.

"It ain't no fault of our'n if he fiddles around tryin' to beat down the price an' git somethin' for nothin' an' lets somebody else grab it out from under his nose, is it?"

"That's none of my business Fulton," rasped Arnold. "All I wants to know is why yuh didn't shine out like the boss tells yuh?"

"Ain't I a-tellin' yuh?" rejoined Andy, calculating his chance of taking Arnold by surprise and lunging in under his gun. "As I says, Tim an' me likes this country an' we aims to stay. Besides, we got all our own an' some borrowed money to boot tied up in this spread an' we ain't in no fix to pull stakes."

"Now don't go a-tellin' me the boss didn't offer to buy yuh out."

"Shore he offered to buy us out," Andy admitted, his ears straining for the sound of hoof-beats he had little hope of ever hearing. "But he didn't offer us only half of what we put in. I reckon mebby the main thing is, Tim an' me don't figger to hightail just 'cause some damn skunk like Henry Morgan tells us to."

The defiant note in Andy's voice reflected in the murderous gleam that leaped into the other man's eyes.

"All right, Fulton, yuh had yore

fair warnin' an' it's yore funeral. The boss sent me over to vacate yuh an' I'm agoin' to do it.

"He figgered it better for one man to take care of the job so too many wouldn't know who done it, an' I figgered I'd take yuh an' yore pardner one at a time. I'll git Kay later. The boss wants this range an' he ain't a-goin' to let a coupla Texas hoptoads beat him outa it. If yuh won't go peaceful then yuh'll go—"

It was a desperate chance, but as it seemed to Andy to be his only chance he didn't hesitate to take it. Perhaps the abruptness of an attack would disconcert Arnold. His body swayed forward for the leap. Arnold fired twice, the shots sounding almost as one. With a choking sob Andy slumped to the floor on his face. For a brief interval Arnold stood there looking down at his victim watchfully, then uttering a heartless laugh he holstered his gun and went out.

ALTHOUGH Tim was profoundly shocked, he wasn't surprised. He was prepared for what he found when returning from Big Oak with the buckboard loaded with supplies the morning of the second day after, he had gone into the kitchen and found all that was mortal of his friend and partner lying on the floor in a pool of coagulated blood.

The stiff, stark carcasses of all those steers he had seen when driving through the range to the house had been sufficient to notify him that Andy had been rubbed out. Certainly Henry Morgan, owner of the Box X outfit, would know that only living cattle could hold Tim and Andy to the range he coveted, therefore the cattle must be eliminated.

But before the cattle could be done away with Andy must be eliminated. With both partner and cattle gone Tim Kay would be forced to leave, else share the same fate as Andy had. It wasn't difficult for Tim to figger that out. It merely happened that Andy instead of himself was the one to go.

His blue eyes moist, he knelt beside the body of his friend to examine it. He found a hole in the breast in the region of the heart and another in the abdomen. Either wound was serious enough to cause death without proper attention, though not necessarily at once. In fact there was evidence that Andy had not immediately died. The trail of blood that ran from near the stove halfway across the kitchen to the cupboard, where the body lay, testified to that.

Moreover, under Andy's right hand Tim found a stub of pencil and a scrap of paper. Tim reconstructed the scene with fair accuracy. The two bullets had shocked Andy into an appearance of death, and the killer, satisfied that he had done his job well, had gone.

Later Andy had recovered sufficiently to crawl to the cupboard for the paper and pencil. As a last act he had for Tim's benefit recorded the name of the man who shot him.

The four capital letters that Andy had scrawled on the paper were faltering and nearly undecipherable, plainly indicating Andy's fast-ebbing consciousness. But Tim somehow, managed them.

"A-R-N-O," he read the letters aloud. "Arno, Arno. Who does he —by God!" he broke off suddenly. "Arnold—Mark Arnold!"

Tim rose to his feet, his hands clenched and his eyes glinting like cold steel. His gaze rested upon Andy's gun in the belt on the chair. He hadn't been given the ghost of a show. He had been slaughtered ruthlessly, murdered by Mark Arnold at the command of Henry Morgan. Tim registered a solemn vow with himself.

Cursing softly to himself, he went out and started carrying the supplies into the house and dumping them in a corner. It was an idle gesture, for they were no good now, but it gave him a chance to think. The buckboard unloaded, he drove away to the barn and unhitched and turned the ponies into the corral.

As neither he nor Andy could claim any other home save that little ranch

into which they had sunk everything they had in the world, it seemed not only convenient but also fitting that Andy should be buried there. So Tim dug a grave and laid his friend away, wrapped in a tarpaulin, shoveled in the earth and smoothed it off.

"God take care yore soul, old-timer," he said huskily. "An' God gimme the luck to git the two skunks responsible for yuh bein' in this grave. They plumb cleaned us, Andy, an' there ain't no use of me tryin' to go ahead, so I'm agoin' back to Texas.

"Afore I go, though, I'll git them two hombres what took yuh from me. God a-helpin' me I shore will. Yuh was a mighty fine sidekick an' I'll never forgit yuh. *Adios,* pal."

Tim was not ashamed of the tears that ran down his cheeks when he turned from the grave, for he and Andy Fulton had been as brothers for more than a dozen years. A long time he sat on the kitchen door-step smoking cigarettes and frowning thoughtfully, the while his gaze was riveted upon that raw spot on the earth beneath the big cottonwood.

That evening after dark Tim rode his Benny horse into Big Oak twenty-two miles away. He stopped at the hotel to engage a room for the night and rode on to the Handy Corner saloon and pool room up the street.

As he walked to the bar he noted that among the seven or eight men present were two of Henry Morgan's Box X riders. They were sitting at a table against the wall opposite the bar.

"What yuh havin', Tim?" the bartender asked.

"Bottle of beer, Johnny."

The bartender opened a bottle of beer and set it and a glass on the bar.

"What's wrong, Tim?" the man asked. "Yuh got a face as long as my arm. Look like yuh lost the best friend on earth."

"I did," said Tim. "I shore did, Johnny. Andy's gone."

"Shore 'nuff? Where's he gone at?"

"I buried him this mornin'."

"He's dead?"

Tim nodded. "Somebody killed him whilst I was here in town gittin' supplies. Went back home an' found him a-layin' on the kitchen floor with a coupla slugs in him."

"The hell you say!" said Johnny. "Sorry to hear that, Tim. Andy shore was a fine feller."

"Best man I ever knowed, Johnny."

"Know who done it?"

Tim looked past the bartender's shoulder into the big bottle shelf mirror and saw the two Box X men watching him and listening.

"Yeah, I know who done it," said Tim, raising his voice a little. "I ain't a-sayin' no names right now, but I know who killed Andy. The party that done it figgered he'd killed Andy immediate, but he didn't an' atter he left Andy come to long enough to git a pencil an' a piece of writin' paper an' write his name down."

TIM saw the Box X men look at each other.

"What yuh goin' to do now?" the bartender asked.

"I'm quittin'," replied Tim. "Ain't no use of me tryin' to go on out there 'cause I ain't got nothin' to go on with.

"Never would be satisfied there without Andy. More'n half of our cows was killed too, shot through the head. I'm cleaned, Johnny. Only thing I can do is go back to Texas an' get a job ridin' for somebody."

"Tough luck," Johnny said sympathetically. "What yuh goin' to do with yore place?"

"Sell it; get what I can outa it an' pay off what Andy an' me borrowed to buy it. Ain't nothin' else to do. Morgan wants to buy an' I reckon he'll get it. If you see him, Johnny, tell him come to see me out home, will yuh? An' tell him I want cash; I don't want no check.

"Lemme see, now. Today's Monday, ain't it? I'm goin' down to Banner tonight an' be there coupla days. Tell Morgan I'll be home Thursday an' come out an' see me some time that atternoon an' bring the cash an' we'll make a deal. I figger on stayin' out there Thursday

night an' he can have the ranch next day."

Tim paused to note if the two Box X men were still listening, and he knew by the tenseness of their faces that they were.

"But I ain't leavin' these parts right away," he went on distinctly. "I got a job to do afore I leave for Texas, an' I wouldn't think of leavin' afore I done it. What I got to do, Johnny, is kill the hombre what killed Andy, an' I'm agoin' to kill him on sight too.

"I hate like hell to plug a man in the back or when he ain't heeled, but any way I find him first time I see him I'm agoin' to ventilate him pronto. Looks of things out home he didn't give Andy no chance, so I don't see no call to give him any."

"That's right, Tim; tit for tat, as the sayin' goes. I knows how you feel."

"Well, yuh be shore an' tell Morgan what I said, Johnny. Tell him I won't git home till about noon Thursday. As I said, I'm beddin' down out there that night, then I'll vacate for keeps. See yuh agin afore I start for Texas, Johnny. So long!"

Tim went out and forked his horse and rode down the street and out of town. A mile or so out he turned from the road into the shadows of a small clump of trees and stopped. Perhaps five minutes later he heard hoof-beats approaching from the direction of town, and presently a pair of horsemen passed at a lively clip.

BY the light of the four-days-old crescent of moon that hung in the western sky Kay recognized the riders as the two Box X men he had seen at the saloon. He uttered a soft sardonic laugh. What their intentions were he did not know and did not follow to learn, but returned to the road and headed back toward town. He left his horse at the livery stable and went on to the hotel and turned in.

As he rode toward the house the following Thursday afternoon about two o'clock to negotiate with Tim for the purchase of the ranch, Henry Morgan was more than pleased with himself. Only such a man as he could bring these obstinate jaspers to terms.

Direct methods always won and if a man got what he wanted he could not be soft. Another man with less backbone would have given up trying to acquire these well-grassed, well-watered range acres of Tim's and Andy's in the face of their repeated refusals to sell.

Henry Morgan was made of sterner stuff and believed in applying the rack to people who thwarted him. That he had been largely responsible for a man's death did not trouble his conscience for the reason that he had none.

If a man chose to be a fool that was his lookout and a wise man accepted him at his own valuation and acted accordingly. Tim and Andy had acted a pair of fools and Andy had paid for it with his life. It would appear that Tim had decided to reform before it was too late.

Morgan left his horse at the corral and went on to the house afoot. He was a man of about Tim's size and build. The most noticeable thing about him was his hat. It was a high-crowned Stetson of a tan color with a braided silver band. It was a hat to stand out rather prominently among the commonplace blacks and dusty greys with the ordinary yellow or black leather bands. Its owner could readily be identified as far as the hat could be seen.

Tim greeted his caller at the kitchen door with a brief nod. Neither friendliness nor animosity showed in his blue eyes, a fact that Henry Morgan would have been wise to note, but apparently didn't. In Tim's heart, however, seethed an intense hatred for the man who had sent Andy to death. Morgan's lips formed a mocking smile.

"I got word you wanted to see me about sellin' out, Kay," he said.

"Yeah, I'm ready to sell now," Tim said. "For spot cash."

"I've got the cash."

"The price will be the same as yuh offered us about six weeks ago," Tim said, and the other nodded. "All right, come in an' we'll fix up the

papers. Bill of sale will do an' we can fix up the deed later."

They went into the kitchen, and then Tim got pen, ink and paper from the cupboard while Morgan sat down to the table and drew a roll of bills from the bosom of his flannel shirt.

While Morgan counted out the money Tim wrote a bill of sale for the ranch and signed it. He recounted the pile of bills Morgan pushed toward him and put them in his pocket and handed Morgan the bill of sale. They got to their feet.

"That's settled," said Morgan, his voice ringing with a note of triumph.

"I'll be damned if it's settled," said Tim.

MORGAN gave him a quick look, saw that Tim's eyes had suddenly gone as hard as flint. Almost mechanically Morgan's right hand dropped to the butt of his pearl-handled gun.

"What do you mean by that, Kay?" he demanded harshly.

"I mean it ain't settled, that's what I mean," Tim said raspingly. "There's another business between yuh an' me to be settled, Morgan. Yuh ain't foolin' me none a-tall. I came home the other day from town an' found my pardner a-layin' right here on the floor dead with two bullets in him."

"What have I got to do with that?"

"Plenty. Yuh wanted this place an' yuh wanted it so damn bad yuh didn't give a damn how yuh got it. Yuh figgered if yuh could put Andy or me outa the way an' kill off some of the stock—"

"You can't prove nothin', Kay, not a damn thing," Morgan broke in hotly. "Even if you had proof of what you claim it wouldn't do you no good."

"I ain't got no proof agin yuh a-tall, Morgan, but that don't keep me from knowin' what I know. I know who killed Andy an' I know who told him to kill Andy."

"Yeah, I heard yuh've been shootin' off yore lip about knowin' who killed yore pardner, Kay. Who do you say it was?"

"Mark Arnold, one of yore yeller gunmen. Like mebby yuh also been told, he didn't kill Andy immediate an' Andy had time to put his name on a piece of paper afore he checked out. Here's the paper if yuh want to see it."

Morgan eyed Tim suspiciously a moment or two, then took it with his left hand, his right still resting on the butt of his gun, and looked at it. Tim's hard fist landed a terrific blow on his jaw and he went down and lay quiet.

It was not quite eight o'clock that night when Mark Arnold stopped his horse about three hundred yards from the house and dismounted. The silvery brightness of the moon enjoined him to extra caution, so at a creeping crouch, his gun in hand and ready for instant use, he stole noiselessly toward the house.

Some time later the gunman reached a point beneath a kitchen window and cautiously raised his eyes above the sill. A lamp was burning in the kitchen, but it had been turned low and the light it gave was rather dim and uncertain.

Nevertheless, it was sufficient for Arnold to see the man sitting in the chair at the table with his head bowed upon his arms, apparently asleep. And certainly that was Tim's battered old black hat with the plaited buckskin band, and Tim's six-gun with the yellow, walnut handle protruding from the holster that rested against the near hip, and Tim's moleskin vest. Arnold's lips parted in a malevolent smile.

"So that's the jaybird that's agoin' to ventilate me on sight, huh?" he said jeeringly to himself. "I'll have a little fun with him afore I rub him out."

He crept to the door nearby and found it locked, and crept back to the window. He would have to forego his fun. Pausing momentarily to lick his coarse lips as if in anticipation of a toothsome morsel, he leveled his gun and fired three times in quick succession. One of the slugs slapped into the shoulder and the others into the sleeping man's head. So great was the impact of the three bullets

that the man in the chair was knocked sideward to the floor.

"Now, damn yuh Mister Kay, lemme see yuh write somebody's name on paper!" snapped Arnold mockingly.

He thrust his gun into the holster and turned to leave.

"Arnold!"

The word rang like the crack of a whip. Arnold whirled to face Tim Kay, who evidently had stepped from around a corner of the kitchen. Arnold's jaw dropped and he vented a gasp of astonishment. Only a few moments before he had shot and killed Tim Kay sleeping at the table in the kitchen, yet there stood Tim Kay in the flesh not more than a dozen steps away.

But what was Tim Kay doing wearing Henry Morgan's tan hat with the silver band on his head and Henry Morgan's pearl-handled six-gun in his holster? The instant after the question occurred to him Arnold caught the deception that had been played upon him. He snarled an oath and Tim laughed.

"I figgered at first to kill yore boss myself, Arnold," Tim said, "then I figgered agin an' thought mebby it would be more like what the feller called poetic justice to let yuh do the job an' sorta get square with him for gittin' yuh in this mess.

"I took him captive when he come to see me this atternoon, an' tonight at supper I fed him some knockout stuff in his coffee I got at the drug-store so yuh wouldn't wake him up when yuh come along. I also figgered them Box X friends of yore'n would tell yuh what they heard me a-sayin' to Johnny, then yuh would be out tonight to git me afore I got yuh.

"As yuh see, Arnold, my gun's holstered. I'm givin' yuh a chance if yuh got the guts to take it."

Arnold took the chance. With lightning speed both guns came from their holsters at the same instant, but only Tim's gun flamed. Arnold pitched forward with a split heart. Tim walked away to the cottonwood where his friend lay at rest.

"Okay, Andy," he said aloud. "Two skunks for one man ain't much of a swap but it'll have to do. An' I also got me a new hat an' vest an' a fine pearl-handle six-gun, Andy. So long, pardner, I'll be a-seein' yuh some time."

He went on to the corral for his Benny horse.

●

IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

Follow a Range Detective on an Exciting Trail in
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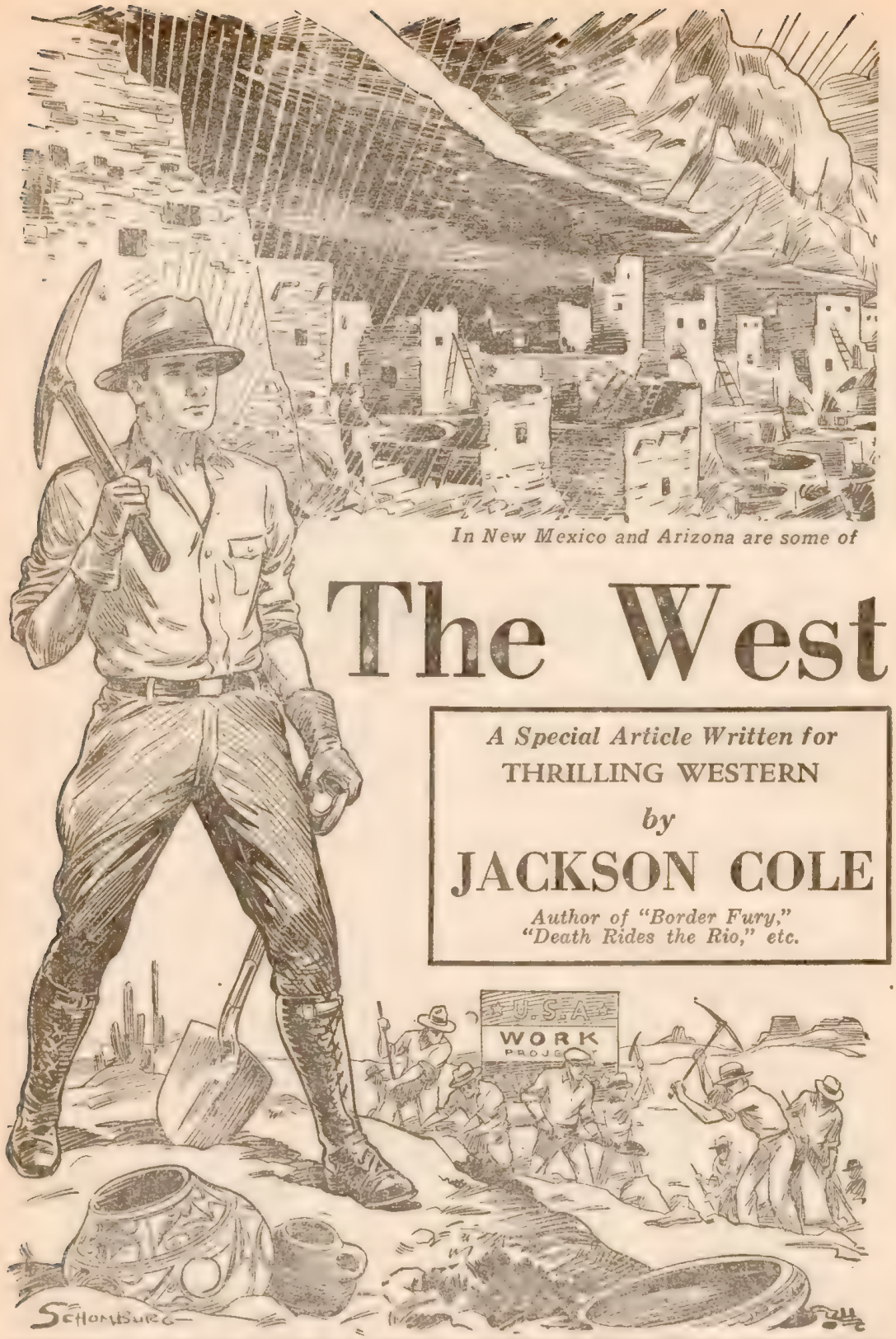

In New Mexico and Arizona are some of

The West

A Special Article Written for
THRILLING WESTERN
by

JACKSON COLE

Author of "Border Fury," "Death Rides the Rio," etc.

The Buried Secrets of America's Glorious

the richest archaeological sources of Indian culture to be found

That Was —and How it is Being Found!

ARCHAEOLOGY is defined as "the science of antiquities; the study of prehistoric remains or the relics of the early races of mankind." To the essence of this definition for such a study the Federal Government has added, "With the help of the unemployed."

Of all the WPA archaeological projects in operation to uncover and preserve the culture of our prehistoric predecessors, those dealing with the Pueblo Indians who lived in the Southwestern part of the United States are among the most interesting.

Pueblo Indian Culture

Situated in the picturesque mountainous country of New Mexico and Arizona are some of the richest archaeological sources of Indian culture to be found. This region is the center of early Pueblo Indian culture and its yield of scientific data rivals that of the Maya, Inca, and Aztec peoples found south of the Rio Grande.

It is here that the forces of the Federal Government are busily engaged in excavating ruins, assembling and classifying materials unearthed, and physically restoring some of these ancient pueblo cities to a semblance of their former greatness.

One of these projects is the restoration of the Tuzigoot Pueblo near Clarkdale, Arizona.

Hundreds of years ago this area was inhabited by the Havasupia, Walapai, and Yavapai tribes of the Pueblo Indians. The county in which work is being carried on is named after the Yavapai tribe.

A few descendants of this once proud people still live in the valley of their forefathers, eking out an

Past are Resurrected by the Nation's Youth!

existence as best they may. Gone are their mighty fortresses which for centuries withstood the attacks of their warring neighbors. Their pueblos, which compare favorably with some forms of modern architecture, lie buried under centuries of debris.

Strange Stories of Ancient Americans

Since the beginning of the Tuzigoot project, work has progressed markedly under the direction of trained scientists who direct the efforts of the WPA personnel doing the excavating and rebuilding. As material is discovered, it is transferred from its centuries-old resting place to the new Tuzigoot museum, located atop the hill where the pueblo is being restored. Here the data are assembled, classified, properly labeled, and displayed in showcases for the use of both scientists and visitors.

The materials unearthed tell strange stories of the ancient peoples who disappeared from Tuzigoot almost eight centuries ago.

Their fields were maintained in a fertile valley; their dwellings being grouped in two fortlike pueblos atop hills forming perfect barriers to the outside world.

Early Use of Camouflage

The houses within the pueblo were built in successive rows for protection in time of war. The rooms were open-roofed, with fire-pits in the center. In each row of houses is a *kiva,* or sacred chamber, where the medicine men sat in important councils and where various religious rituals were performed. That they lived in fear of invasion is shown by the grain caches which were made by holing out rocky cliff walls, sealing the exterior, and camouflaging its surface. Several caches have been found that were sealed centuries ago.

Specimens unearthed show that the Tuzigoot artisans reached near perfection in the ceramic arts. Pottery on display at the museum is glazed and adorned with incised and painted decoration of ornate design. Specimens of their famous black-on-white pottery have been unearthed.

Near Globe, Arizona, are located the ruins of the Pesh-ba-gowah pueblo. Here, another WPA archaeological project is unearthing scientific data and physically restoring the ancient 120-room pueblo.

Several characteristics of scientific importance have been found in this ruin.

The children were not buried in the community cemetery but were interred near their mothers' dwelling houses, seemingly recognizing their dependency even in death.

A Peaceful Tribe

A study of the many skeletons unearthed at Pesh-ba-gowah leads ethnologists to believe that most of these people lived to be 60 or 70 years old. This would indicate that the tribe did not engage in extensive warfare.

Pesh-ba-gowah means "village of metals" and is so named because of the many ores found in this section. These people made paint from the ores, with green and red being most widely used.

The Seven Cities of the Cibolo

Situated near the sloping banks of the Rio Grande, two miles northwest of Bernalillo, New Mexico, another WPA archaeological project is bringing to light the long-buried culture of the Puaray and Kuana Pueblos.

These cities were built centuries ago by natives of the Tiguex Indian province. It was here (1540-1541) that Coronado lingered for many months while in quest for the "Seven Cities of the Cibolo."

Puaray Pueblo is rectangular in form and 300 by 400 feet in size. Here, an especially large *kiva,* or ceremonial chamber, was found, located near the center of the box-like structure. Thus far, excavations revealing 375 rooms have been made.

Kuana Pueblo, located a short distance from Puaray Pueblo, is similar in shape and construction. This ruin has yielded a series of beautiful

painted murals which are being studied at the University of New Mexico as a part of the project undertaking. The Kuana artists used six colors; red, yellow, green, black, white and a sixth that remains undetermined. The first five were made from iron ore. It is possible that the sixth was made from vegetable pigment which decomposed as the centuries passed.

Irrigation Systems

Of great importance among the list of "finds" credited to these ruins is evidence of an irrigation system. Water from several springs located in the hills above the pueblo was used to irrigate many acres of semi-arid land.

Although these archaeological projects concern the culture of several different pueblo-building tribes the data unearthed indicate that they had many common traits.

From evidence assembled scientists believe they were an agrarian people and raised maize, beans, melons, squashes, onions, chili peppers, and sunflower seeds. To these they added certain wild plants such as pinon nuts, mesquite, wild beans and saguarro, used even today by their descendants. Cotton and tobacco were cultivated extensively.

A Peaceful People

Many customs practiced by our present day civilization were known to these ancient pueblos many centuries ago. Fertilizer was placed in maize hills to insure good production. Tobacco was smoked in pipes and cigarettes, the latter made from hollowed-out reeds. They domesticated the dog and the turkey and used baskets for transporting materials. With their crude looms they made hammocks, simple garments and other cotton articles. They knew the use of a musical flute and their double-headed drum is similar to our modern jazz band drum.

Many pieces of pottery unearthed are adorned with ornate design. It is interesting to note that the swastika is incised or painted on many of these—and their form of living was essentially a communal one. The dignity of labor appealed to both sexes and the Pueblo men and women worked side by side in the communal fields.

An Agrarian People

Scientists say this is because they were an agrarian people whose culture was based on a strict agricultural economy.

Thus, this civilization which literally lay down and went to sleep eight centuries ago is being revealed by the forces of the Federal Government under scientific supervision. Day after day WPA workers are unearthing data significant to some phase of this ancient culture. As these "finds" are made they are assembled and classified, thus becoming criteria, by which men of science interpret the chronology and culture of the pueblo people inhabiting New Mexico and Arizona in prehistoric times.

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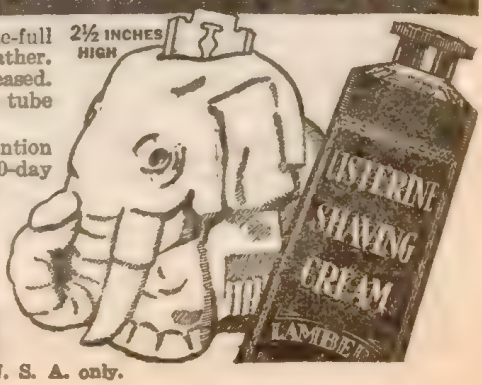

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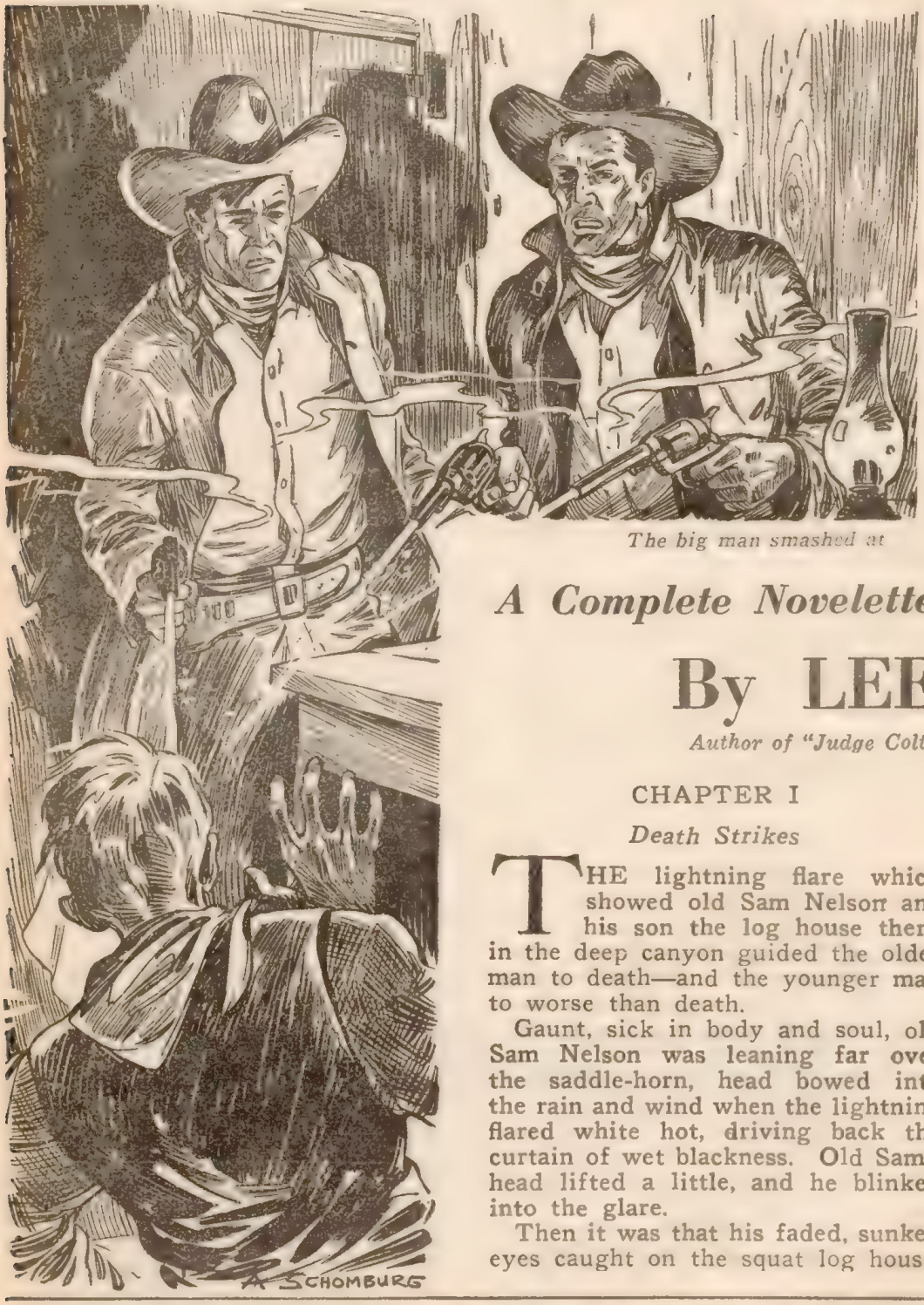

The big man smashed at

A Complete Novelette

By LEE

Author of "Judge Colt,"

CHAPTER I

Death Strikes

THE lightning flare which showed old Sam Nelson and his son the log house there in the deep canyon guided the older man to death—and the younger man to worse than death.

Gaunt, sick in body and soul, old Sam Nelson was leaning far over the saddle-horn, head bowed into the rain and wind when the lightning flared white hot, driving back the curtain of wet blackness. Old Sam's head lifted a little, and he blinked into the glare.

Then it was that his faded, sunken eyes caught on the squat log house.

The Stern Law of Smoking Lead Sets

Hoss Thieves

Greg's head with a gun barrel

of Western Justice

BOND

"Gunsmoke Law," etc.

Young Greg Nelson had seen the cabin, too, for he spurred suddenly alongside his father, boyish voice lifted above the roar of rain, wind and thunder.

"Off left yonder is a house, Dad!" the boy called. "I seen it plain when that lightnin' flashed."

Together they swung their mounts and let the horses walk toward the spot where they had seen the house.

After the lightning bolt, the night seemed blacker than ever. Even the keen eyes of young Greg could not pierce the gloom enough to locate that log house. But the two horses stopped after a few moments, and young Greg bounced down from the saddle, slicker popping noisily as

the Scene for a Renegade Roundup!

he stalked forward, his hands outthrust before him.

Greg found the log wall, felt along it until he located a door. He pressed his lips close to the door, and yelled loudly several times. When there was no answer from inside, Greg lifted the latch and entered. He flung his slicker back, got a match, and scratched it on a slicker buckle. The yellow light showed him a table just ahead—a table that held a coal oil lamp and a big batch of dirty dishes.

"Anybody home?" Greg yelled again.

ONLY his voice was flung back in echo, and Greg stepped forward, lifted the lamp's chimney, and touched flame to the wick.

When he replaced the lamp chimney and yellow light had flooded the room, Greg saw instantly that the place had been occupied within the past few hours. The three-legged stove over in one corner was still warm to the touch, and there was the faint odor of cooked foods, tobacco smoke and the unmistakable tang of stale whiskey fumes.

Greg Nelson's boyish face settled into serious lines as his wide-spaced black eyes roved sharply about the long, low-roofed room. The stringy youngster's nerves tightened under a nameless sort of uneasiness.

He had the uncomfortable feeling that eyes were peering at him from the rain-wet windows or through some of the open cracks where the clay and stick chinking had fallen from the log walls. But outside sat old Sam Nelson, so sick he could barely keep his gaunt old body in the saddle.

Greg Nelson's lips pulled into a determined line. His father was a sick man and needed shelter, to say nothing of warm food and a night's rest. The doctors up in Montana had told Sam Nelson that perhaps this warmer, drier, Arizona country would help patch up his lungs, give him a chance to regain his health.

Old Sam Nelson had sold his little ranch there in the badlands along the Missouri River and headed south with his motherless son. But old Sam and Greg Nelson both knew that the trip was futile. Old Sam's racking cough had become worse, and the flesh had withered from his face until the cheek-bones showed sharp and rough beneath unnaturally red skin. Greg Nelson was thinking of his sick father now as he turned to the door.

"To hell with whoever coyoted from this place when Dad an' me rode up!" the boy gritted. "Whoever owns this place can come back an' get paid for what Dad an' me eat if they want to."

The boy stepped out through the door, called to the slumped old man who still sat there in the rain, clutching a saddle-horn with blue-veined fingers that were stiff and wet.

Sam Nelson dismounted, reeled through the door into the lighted cabin. He was a gaunt scarecrow of a man, whose opaque eyes burned fever bright from a face that was drawn and white except for red splashes across sharply jutting cheek-bones.

Old Sam Nelson threw off his slicker, clumped across to a tier of wall bunks that held dirty rumpled blankets. The old fellow coughed chokingly for a moment, and tried to hide the blood that seeped across pallid lips with a quick spike of one thin hand. Old Sam threw the dirty bedding from the lower bunk, sprawled limply on the rawhide lacings.

Greg Nelson watched, pale of face and inwardly shaken. Old Sam was worse off than the boy had supposed, and Greg felt a sudden numbing fear possess him as he watched his father's thin chest pumping breath, and saw the ugly pallor that followed the coughing spell.

But Sam Nelson seemed to feel his son's eyes upon him. The old fellow opened his lips in a slow grin, lids fluttering wider from those unnaturally bright eyes.

"Reckon I'm shore gettin' old, buttons." Sam Nelson's chuckle was ghastly. "But don't get any funny notions in that noggin, Greg. I'll be

all right after a bit. That rain chilled me a mite, that's all."

"I'm takin' that lantern yonder an' goin' out to tend the horses, Dad." Greg forced a calmness he was far from feeling. "There'll be a barn or shed around, I reckon. I'll fetch our stuff in and cook a snack. Hot grub is what yuh need."

The boy snatched the lantern, lighted it, and stalked from the room. He returned ten minutes later, lugging two heavy bed-rolls containing food supplies and camp tools. Old Sam did look a little better now, and Greg managed to whistle a little as he fired up the stove, slicked steaks from a chunk of venison, and set a coffee-pot over a hot stove lid.

GREG was unable to forget the fact that someone had quit this cabin about the time he and his father spotted it and came toward it. Out there in the little barn he had found were three horses, munching hay, saddles still on their backs. Greg had seen the Walking M iron on the three horses, and remembered that up the trail he and his father had heard of Dick Spain and his Walking M spread.

According to the things Greg and his daddy had heard, Dick Spain's Walking M was a fine big outfit—one of the best in the country around Flag. Therefore Greg could not figure why, if this happened to be a Walking M line camp, the three men who had been here in the cabin had fled at the approach of strange riders.

Greg Nelson was both nervous and alert. Perhaps that was why he heard the door creak open even before he felt the cold blast of storm wind and heard the swift hissing of slickers as men rushed into the house.

Greg dropped the knife with which he had been cutting meat. He spun in a lithe movement, eyes widening as he saw the three men in dripping slickers bulge through the door.

The man in the lead was a burly, thick-lipped fellow, with ugly green little eyes and a mop of coarse red hair that strung down from beneath a big wet Stetson. The redhead had a cocked six-shooter in each big fist, and there was a white ring about his ugly taut mouth.

The man directly behind the husky redhead was slim and wiry, and had a pinched face, thin red mouth and hooked nose. From that thin face gazed two china-blue eyes that were about the coldest, most dangerous eyes into which Greg Nelson had ever looked.

The third man heeled the door shut, sidled along the wall until he was out in the open. He was a lank, loose-jointed hombre, with a seamed, bony face and tawny eyes that looked like the eyes of a cat. Like the thin-faced gent and the big redhead, this gawky one held a brace of cocked six-guns.

"Howdy," Greg Nelson said. "Dad an' me dropped in outa the storm, gents. This yore place?"

Old Sam Nelson sat up now, evidently awakened from a doze. The guns in the fists of those three shifted. The big redhead said something from one corner of his loose mouth.

Greg Nelson yelled shrilly, started plunging across the room. But those three cold-faced hellions who stood there in wet slickers seemed not to hear Greg's frantic cry.

The big redhead's guns roared and the guns of his companions chimed in, filling the cabin with their hoarse thunder. Greg Nelson saw his father swept back and down, saw the thin, wasted body jerk time and again as smoking lead beat the life from the sick man.

Then the three were turning, for Greg Nelson was among them, screaming curses, fists smashing out blows that stung and rocked the redhead. The big man cursed through bloody lips, smashed at Greg's head with a gun-barrel. The boy dodged, but the hulking redhead kicked him in the groin, doubling him over.

"That little son knocked a tooth loose for me," the redhead rumbled. "Strip the shirt off him, boys, an' hand me that quirt from the wall

peg yonder. I'll teach this little son a thing or two before we turn him over to Sheriff Fred Kyle for hanging."

CHAPTER II

Greg Rides On

GREG NELSON was tough muscled for an eighteen-year-old. Sick though he was, he fought with a silent, white-lipped fury when the thin, wiry man and the loose-jointed one came toward him. Greg's solid brown fists knocked the thin faced man down twice, and he managed to kick the gawky fellow in the belly. Then Greg darted past the cursing, gasping pair, charged to the bunk where his father lay sprawled.

A single look told the half-sobbing youngster that old Sam Nelson was dead. Slugs had cut through the gaunt cheeks, smashed into the thin, sunken chest.

Greg Nelson whirled, tear blinded, as booted feet crashed toward him. A gun-barrel caught him across the face, and a fist hooked under his left ear when he would have fallen.

Greg fought weakly as long as he could lift his fists. He knew dimly that he was being badly mauled, and that these three men were cursing him for a horse thief, calling him names that the lowest saloon bum would resent.

The light in the cabin seemed to grow dim, fade gradually to a dull, distant glow. Then Greg knew that he was on the floor, and that fingers were at his throat, shutting off his breath. He heard the hoarse voice of that big redhead lifted in anger, and felt the fingers lessen the pressure at his throat. But blows smashed into Greg Nelson's face and body when he tried to wiggle out from under the weight of the man who sat astride him.

Now the red-headed man's voice was booming again, and Nelson was dimly aware that he was being rolled about the floor, and that ropes were pinching down tight across his wrists. After that something began gnawing at Greg's forehead. The pain was so intense that he cried out once. He heard coarse laughter, and thought he smelled something burning. He remembered the venison steak he had dropped in the frying pan on the stove, and wondered if it was burning.

After that Greg Nelson knew nothing until strong sunlight struck into his face, seeping through the puffed swollen lids to torture his bloodshot eyes. Greg's brain stirred sluggishly as he rolled half over. Pain stabbed through every inch of his body, came hammering up into his brain until he felt like vomiting. But his eyes were open now, staring blankly up at a dingy roof.

He blinked, moved his throbbing head sidewise so that the shaft of sunlight would not strike fully into his face. Greg saw dim walls high about him, and saw that the sunlight came through a very small window high up in a log wall. He saw, too, that stout iron bars crossed that little window.

The boy sat up, gasping from the ache of battered muscles. Slowly, then, he arose from the grimy cot, to stand staring about a great, barn-like room that was punctured here and there along the walls by those tiny barred windows.

Greg's boots made dull sounds over a solid cement flooring as he walked toward a heavily barred door. The door looked out into a little hallway, at the far end of which was another, ordinary door. He smelled tobacco smoke, and heard voices coming from beyond that other door up yonder, but he was too sick at the moment to think clearly.

Searing pain ran along his forehead and kept tears rolling down his cheeks. Greg lifted a shaking hand, winced as his fingers ran over a mass of raw, swollen flesh. He was shaking from head to foot, remembering last night, and remembering how he had last seen his father, dead there on the rawhide lacings of that bunk.

Greg choked back a sob and

turned from the barred door. He saw a wash bench, water bucket and cracked mirror at the far side of the room, and went toward them. He glanced into the cracked old mirror, then became suddenly as stiff and cold as the iron bars across the little window above his head.

Greg Nelson was staring at a reflection in that mirror that he hardly recognized as his own. His face was a lumpy, purple splotched mass of bruises, with great, dark rings about each bloodshot eye. But the thing that drained the blood from the boy's battered face and brought a hoarse oath to his lips was sight of a bloody, deep-gouged letter T squarely in the center of his forehead.

Greg remembered now how that awful pain had gnawed at his forehead the night before, and how he had dimly recognized the odor of burning flesh.

WITH a sob of rage the youngster turned and limped back across the room. He kicked savagely at the heavy steel-barred door, waking dull echoes from the big jail room.

Down the corridor men's voices lifted excitedly, then the thin door flung back to frame a big, pot-bellied man who had a glinting sheriff's badge pinned to the front of a dirty grey shirt. The big fellow called something over one rounded shoulder, came slogging down the corridor, heavy jowls shivering at each step. His wide lips held a loose grin, and his shifty, pale grey eyes were anything but pleasant as he halted before the barred door to stare at the battered, white-lipped boy.

"What am I doin' in this jail house?" Greg Nelson husked.

"Hoss thieves," the big sheriff wheezed, "usually wind up behind bars."

"What the hell has that got to do with me?" the boy flung back. "Sheriff, there's a mistake some place. I ain't a hoss thief. Three murderin' coyotes jumped Dad an' me last night—"

The boy's voice choked at the memory, yet he forced the words through his stiff and aching throat. He told swiftly and accurately what had happened, while the fat sheriff stood listening, shaggy head cocked a little to one side, a crafty look in his pale eyes.

"An' now I wake up in jail, with a letter T burnt between my eyes," Greg Nelson finished hoarsely. "Let me out, Sheriff, an' help me run down them three sons that—"

The boy's voice ended in a wheezing sort of sound. Into the far end of that little hallway strolled the big, burly redhead who had led the charge into the log cabin the night before. Behind the redhead came his two companions, and the three were grinning coldly as they stomped to a halt beside the sheriff.

"That's them, Sheriff!" Greg Nelson panted. "There's the three dirty back shootin' sons that murdered Dad an' beat me up. Arrest them coyotes!"

"Arrest Dick Spain?" the big sheriff chortled, and flung a hand toward the burly redhead. "Damn yore mangy hide, Dick Spain an' his two men ketched you an' that old feller you claim was yore daddy red-handed. You an' that old man had a hundred head of Mr. Spain's best hosses corraled out there at that log shack, ready to drive the broncs out of the country."

Greg Nelson choked over the words that came into his throat.

"Yuh're gettin' off easy, you mangy little whelp!" Dick Spain flung out hotly. "My two men and me taken pity on yuh because yuh ain't nothin' but a slick eared kid. Con Jetson, here, ramrod of my Walkin' M, talked me and Sim Wingate into sparin' yore hide last night."

Dick Spain jerked a hand toward the wiry man with the china-blue eyes as he called the name Con Jetson. That other, loose-jointed horse-faced hellion then would be Sim Wingate. Greg Nelson connected the names and the faces as he stood there, breathing heavily.

"You dirty, lyin' son, Dad an' me never stole any hosses!" Greg panted.

"I'll prove that, Spain. I can send back to Montana for proof that the Nelsons ain't thieves. An' I'll take the eight thousand Dad had in his money belt and use it to send you an' them two bootlickers with you to the gallows for murderin' my Dad."

DICK SPAIN'S coarse face went red, an oath bubbled over his wet lips. But he checked his anger, greenish eyes slitting as he grinned coldly at the battered youngster.

"That old heller yuh claim was yore daddy never had any money on him, button," Spain rumbled. "All he had was a phony bill of sale for them hundred Walkin' M hosses."

Greg saw the fat sheriff and the Walking M ramrod, Con Jetson, nudge each other, heard their low chuckles. Lank, loose-jointed Sim Wingate chuckled through crooked lips, eyeing Greg coldly.

"Yuh're lucky, kid," he said flatly. "Yuh got beat up some, shore. An' yuh'll carry that T brand someone burnt on yore head the rest of yore life. T stands for thief, in case you don't know it!"

"Mr. Spain is bein' big-hearted, young feller," the flabby sheriff leered. "He figgers that wherever yuh go folks will see that T and know it stands for thief. So instead of prosecutin' an' sendin' yuh over the road like he ought to do, Mr. Spain is turnin' yuh loose."

"With the advice not to go stirrin' up things by tryin' to mix any Montana friends into this," Dick Spain snarled. "Sheriff Kyle, here, is unlockin' this door. Yuh'll be given a horse an' started yonderly. With yore old man dead an' you out of the country, the horse-stealing ring that has been drivin' us ranchers crazy for a couple of years will be busted up."

Again the three Walking M men laughed that cold laughter, and the sheriff joined them, winking one pale eye at Dick Spain.

Greg Nelson stood there, gripped by the sort of rage he had never known before. And in those moments Greg Nelson was given a wisdom superior to his years. Slowly the boy's mind took the pieces of the whole situation, fitted them into an ominous picture.

Dick Spain and those two hirelings of his there beside him had deliberately murdered old Sam Nelson. They had robbed his dead body of eight thousand dollars. Greg knew that as surely as if he had watched them strip the thick money belt from beneath Sam Nelson's woolen shirt.

"Yuh better ride far an' fast when I let yuh out," the sheriff hummed. "The ranchers in these parts have lost so many good hosses an' cattle that they've formed a vigilante committee. Let 'em sight you, an' yuh'll swing to a pine limb on some of these slopes around here."

So that was it! Like a physical blow the truth was hammered home to Greg Nelson. Dick Spain and his Walking M outfit were, unquestionably, behind whatever horse and cattle stealing had been done around Flag. Their grins, their sly gloating, had told Greg that much. That this pot-gutted, pale-eyed sheriff was hand and glove with the Walking M bunch there was no doubt. The picture was complete now.

Greg Nelson understood the whole sordid mess. And the wisdom that had come in this hour of grief and suffering told Greg to keep what he knew strictly to himself. The wolf-eyed glances of those four men out there warned Greg. Those four men would kill him as his father had been killed unless he played his hand with the utmost caution.

Strangely enough, that rage, that was bringing deep wisdom to the battered boy, was not the sort of rage that made him shake inwardly and want to fight. The rage was a deep rooted something that burned within the soul of him.

A cold, calculating sort of calm seized Nelson. His black eyes, hooded by swollen, discolored lids, took in each detail of the four faces before him. The boy's lips set hard against his teeth and his head nodded.

"I'll ride," he said simply, and

wondered at the flat tone of his own voice.

He saw the four men out there almost beam their pleasure, saw a triumphant "I-told-you-so" look on the face of Dick Spain.

CHAPTER III

A Problem for Spain

THAT day Greg Nelson left Flag on a runty, knock-kneed little roan pony. The saddle he rode was a badly patched cast-off, undoubtedly picked from some refuse heap about town. As Greg walked the sorry roan down along Flag's main street his hooded eyes raked the sidewalks, noting the sullen-faced men who glowered at him.

"Horse thief!" the words whipped out a number of times as the boy jogged on. But there was still that cold something inside Greg which made him strangely immune to the jibes and sneers of the men who watched him from the sidewalk.

Behind Greg Nelson came Dick Spain, Con Jetson and Sim Wingate. The three were grinning coldly, and Greg saw that Dick Spain was riding the big sorrel gelding that had belonged to old Sam Nelson. Con Jetson was perched on the sleek blood bay roping horse that was Greg's own. The bay kept tossing its head, whinnying. The bay wanted to race ahead to the master it loved and trusted. Greg had to fight for control when he saw Con Jetson yank back on stiff reins until blood showed in the bay's gaping mouth.

Then Greg Nelson was beyond the little town, jogging toward a great, pine-clad ridge that stretched black and foreboding against the skyline. He was striking the heavy timber along the ridge when Dick Spain and the other two Walking M men overtook him. Greg slowed as they hailed him, watched out of coldly unwinking eyes while they approached, circled him.

Jigger, the blood bay, reached out, whinnying softly as it sniffed inquiringly at Greg's leg. Con Jetson cursed in a thin voice, cracked the bay across the head with a loaded quirt.

Grinning widely, Dick Spain rammed a big, hairy hand inside his shirt front, drew out something and slammed it full into Greg's face. The boy rocked under the blow, stared down at the thick leather money-belt which lay like a flat snake across his lap. Greg's head whirled, and blood pounded madly at his temples. That money-belt, empty now, had belonged to his father.

"Thought yuh might be needin' that," Dick Spain sneered. "It'll serve to remind yuh that this country is waitin' to put yuh six feet under if you ever show up again. Now get, damn you!"

Dick Spain cut the roan sharply across the rump with a quirt. The pony jolted off up the slope, snorting in pain, tail ringing. As the black timber swallowed the slumped rider, Dick Spain turned a broad grin on his two hirelings. The grin faded, however, as he caught the look in the blue eyes of his thin-faced foreman.

"What the hell's eatin' you, Jetson?" Spain snorted. "We're eight thousand dollars richer, an' found a couple of goats to unload this horse stealin' onto. We'll settle down quiet as Sunday-school teachers now and let every one think we're the huckleberries that put a stop to the rustlin' of horses and cattle. The set-up is as sweet as a unkissed gal, yet yuh look like yuh was clabbered plumb through."

"I didn't like the look in that kid's eye, Spain," Con Jetson said thinly. "Another thing that worries me is the way he froze up. That feller is plenty gritty, you know that. But he was—"

"Scared stiff!" Sim Wingate cut in. "Hell, Jetson, quit throwin' a wet blanket over the fun. What you need is a gut full of nose paint to lift yore spirits. That button will quit the country like his tail was on fire."

"What could the little fool prove if he did try to stir up somethin'?" Dick Spain grunted. "Hell, nobody would believe that maverick. Besides, there's three of us to swear that we caught him and his old man red-handed. We'll take a bunch of them damned vigilantes out to that shack today and show 'em them hundred Walkin' M hosses."

"Lucky, wasn't it, how them two fools come along just when we was pennin' a hundred hosses there in that canyon so we could claim they had been stolen, an' then let them damned vigilantes find the broncs?" Sim Wingate chuckled. "The thing couldn't have worked out better even if we had planned on meetin' that old son an' the kid there an' makin' goats of them."

"That eight thousand cash wasn't hard to take, either," Dick Spain grinned. "What say we put a little of that dinero into circulation, boys? I want to get back to town an' keep tellin' it scary how we've put a stop to the horse stealin' around here."

"Just the same, it won't hurt to keep an eye peeled for that damned kid," Con Jetson rasped. "Spain, I tell yuh that feller was doin' some tall thinkin'. The look in his eye was shore like the look of a gent that ain't licked by a long shot. I'm uneasy as hell an' don't mind admittin' it."

NOR did that uneasiness let Con Jetson rest. For long months the thin-faced, cold-eyed gunman would start nervously any time he spotted a smallish rider. Dick Spain and Sim Wingate rawhided Con Jetson a lot about his boogery notions, and poked fun at him each time he mentioned that youngster who had been sent drifting on a sorry nag.

Then even the uneasy conscience of Con Jetson began to grow calmer as the third year passed and no word had come from the boy who had been run out of the country. Or perhaps, it was the plans of Dick Spain which took the mind of Con Jetson off the battered boy who had been driven out of Flag that day.

There had not been a single case of horse stealing or cattle rustling reported to the pot-gutted sheriff at the end of the fourth year. The ranchers had long since been lulled into a sense of security, and their horses and cattle were no longer heavily guarded.

Dick Spain and his two main gunmen, Con Jetson and Sim Wingate, began sitting up nights behind tightly shuttered windows there at the big log Walking M ranchhouse. The time was ripe, Dick Spain decided, to make another rich haul in horses and cattle. Sheriff Fred Kyle was called into the conference, and people around Flag noticed that the big, sloppy sheriff was acting nervous lately, and that he was drinking almost a quart of whiskey each day.

But those observing souls, who might have attached some significance to the sheriff's uneasiness, were soon busy thinking of other, more pressing matters.

A man on the north rims lost almost his complete stock of fine young Morgans. The sheriff gathered a huge posse and roared up through the cool, green mountains, claiming to hunt the horse thieves. And while the sheriff was wearing out men and horses back among the far flung peaks, thieves struck three lightning swift blows at ranches down nearer Flag.

That one of those ranches was the Walking M did not seem strange to anyone except Dick Spain, Con Jetson, Sim Wingate and the pot-bellied sheriff. Those four were goggle-eyed with amazement. Fifty head of Dick Spain's finest saddlers had vanished from a special pasture where he kept his choice stock. Dick Spain cursed until he was hoarse, green eyes dangerous pools that were alive with murderous lights.

"Some damned snake is tryin' to get funny with me!" the Walking M owner raged as he faced the sheriff and his two hirelings there in a deep canyon where they had met.

"I wouldn't call takin' fifty fine hosses funny," the big sheriff gulped. "Spain, do yuh reckon we've slipped some place? Do yuh reckon some

rancher is wise to us, an' that he took yore broncs to sorta pass out a warnin'?"

"Them broncs would average at least two hundred dollars apiece on the present market, since they was mostly blooded stuff," Sim Wingate growled. "Hell, fellers, that takes the profit outa that job we pulled up north. But we sacked them other two spreads down here, so we ain't so bad off."

"The hell of it is, who would have the guts to make a pass at the Walkin' M right at the time when us fellers was sackin' a couple spreads down here?" Con Jetson rasped. "Somethin' damned funny about this deal, men. We better slow up until we savvy this thing better."

"Say, wait a minute!" the sheriff bleated suddenly. "I've just thought of somethin'. Spain, you or any of the boys been over to see that feller who bought out the old Styles place a couple of months back?"

"I ain't been over, but I've seen that feller out on the range a time or two," Dick Spain snorted. "Runty old coot with a game left leg. His name's Frosty Dolan, ain't it?"

"Correct." The sheriff looked excited now. "An' have yuh noticed Dolan's hired hands, Spain?"

Dick Spain and the other two Walking M men were catching the sheriff's excitement now.

"We've seen some of Dolan's riders, shore," Con Jetson said slowly. "If I remember things right, they're a mighty salty-lookin' crew, too."

"But yuh ain't seen Dolan nor any of his men hangin' around town, have yuh?" the sheriff cried. "Nor I'll bet yuh never got in speakin' distance of Dolan's Star Seven bunch unless you rode up accidental on 'em some place."

"Say, that's right," Sim Wingate snapped. "Con an' me angled out to meet one of them Star Seven rannies one day, aimin' to chin a while. But danged if the feller didn't cut into a draw an' duck us slick as grease."

"Maybe yuh've hit somethin' Kyle," Dick Spain said thickly. "It don't stand to reason that any of the regular ranchers around here would touch my hosses. Lay the hooks to them broncs, you three. We're curryin' that Star Seven outfit for brands."

Dick Spain and his three murderous henchmen roared away, heading up the canyon. From a cedar clump a few scant yards above where Spain and his cohorts had sat their saddles talking, a lean flanked, black-eyed cowboy lifted himself cautiously, watched the riders roar away.

The tight-lipped mouth of that black-eyed cowboy formed a hard line across a bronzed face. Now the man's hands left the butts of twin guns that were thonged low to his thighs. The brown right hand swept up, pushed back a big black Stetson. The fingers of that lean right hand traced slowly along a deeply scarred letter T that stood out boldly on the high forehead.

Unless they could have seen that brand on his forehead, even Dick Spain and his hand picked killers would not have recognized that hard-lipped, cold-eyed cowboy as the battered youngster they had driven from the country a few years ago on a sorry roan pony. Greg Nelson, grown now, had come back to deal with the men who had murdered his father.

CHAPTER IV

Bullet Greeting

IT was almost sundown when Dick Spain and the sheriff roared into the ranch yard of the Star Seven. Dick Spain and his pet sheriff were not in the habit of showing any man's property much respect. They jumped their horses over the low yard gate, spurring straight toward the wide porch which fronted the low walled log house.

They were halfway to the porch when the front door jerked open. Frosty Dolan, short, stocky of build, stepped out onto the porch, round, weathered face screwed into a deep

scowl. Frosty Dolan held a cocked six-shooter in each gnarled fist, and his grey eyes looked like freshly honed steel as he stepped to the edge of the porch.

Frosty Dolan's guns roared by way of greeting the two spurring visitors. Heavy leaden slugs smashed into the dirt under the churning hoofs of the two horses. Sheriff Fred Kyle's big, flabby body boiled up over the saddle pommel, spilled sidewise when his horse, skidding stiff legged, swerved. The sheriff made a ridiculous picture, sprawled on his belly there in the yard, blinking like a great, dazed toad up at the grizzled Dolan.

DICK SPAIN, nimbler than the sheriff, managed to keep his seat in the saddle when his horse started that stiff legged skid. But Dick Spain had to choke the biscuit with his left hand, while he reared back hard on the reins that were gripped in the thick fingers of his hairy right paw.

"Just keep them Colt hooks where they are, Spain," Frosty Dolan's voice was as brittle as new ice. "Let loose of that saddle-horn, or drop the reins, an' I'll shoot yuh. You, Kyle, heave yore carcass up from there an' quit blubberin'. Unless you want to have a bad accident, Kyle, don't touch ary gun as you get up."

The big sheriff, purple-faced and somewhat shaken, came slowly to his feet, careful to keep flabby hands well away from the guns at his thick thighs. The sheriff drew himself up, trying to look as important as possible.

"What the hell does this mean, Dolan?" he spluttered. "I'm the law around here, and for two bits I'd run you in for tryin' to—to kill honest citizens."

"Run over an' gather up the reins of that bronc yuh fell off of," Frosty Dolan grunted. "Lead the horse back to the yard gate an' take it outside. You foller him, Spain. Maybe you two sons didn't know it, but horses ain't allowed in the Star Seven yard. Get a move on an' don't argue. These guns might go off accidental if either of you two got balky."

Something in the stumpy little man's voice and eye warned the scowling sheriff that the best policy was to follow instructions. The sheriff shot a quick, uneasy glance at Dick Spain, who sat purple faced and scowling. Then the sheriff slogged over to his horse, grabbed up the trailing reins, and led the animal back across the yard.

Frosty Dolan followed them, grinning a little as he heard them muttering in low tones. When the gate closed behind the two disgruntled men Frosty Dolan stopped on wide planted boots, eyeing them narrowly.

"Now," he said flatly, "if you two want to make a visit come through the gate on foot like white men. You two may ride roughshod over other people around here, but you'll respect the Star Seven or keep to hell off it, one of the two."

"You'll sweat for this, Dolan!" Dick Spain found his voice at last. "No two-bit nester can come in here an' pull stuff on us like you've pulled. We come over to—"

Dick Spain broke off, licking uneasily at his lips. The sheriff, standing close, had elbowed Dick Spain's bent knee.

"You come over lookin' for some horses that disappeared from your big wire trap," Frosty Dolan chuckled. "That right, Spain?"

Dick Spain and the sheriff both stiffened, their eyes bugging out as they stared at the hard eyed man there inside the yard.

"What the hell do you know about them missin' hosses?" the sheriff flung out.

"Yeah, you spoke outa turn that time, Dolan," Dick Spain said thickly. So you know somethin' about them hosses of mine, do you?"

"I know as much about the horses that are missin' from yore Walking M, Spain, as you and that lard gutted thing with you there know about the horses that are missin' from that ranch up north of here an' the two ranches that were raided down here lately," Frosty Dolan grinned coldly. "But don't let what I say booger

yuh too much, boys. Come on into the house an' meet the boss. He wants to talk matters over with yuh."

"Boss?" Dick Spain gulped, trying hard to marshal his wits. "I—we thought you owned this Star Seven, Dolan."

"I never told anybody I owned this outfit," Dolan grunted. "The idea got started somehow that I own the Star Seven, shore. But said idea is plumb wrong. The Star Seven is owned by the son of a gent I used to work for up in Montana. Come on in, you two."

Frosty Dolan's leveled guns and slitted, watchful eyes gave the two little choice but to follow his suggestions. Dick Spain heaved himself slowly out of the saddle, careful to make no quick moves.

"What the hell are we up against, Spain?" the big sheriff blubbered. "I've got a creepy feelin' along my back."

"That's the yaller streak wigglin' in yuh, Kyle," Frosty Dolan gritted. "But I ain't one to insult company. Rattle yore hocks this way, you two."

The two entered the gate, sidled past Frosty Dolan, and stalked up a graveled walk to the porch.

"Go right on in," Frosty Dolan sang out. "I'm bein' real perlite, an' sorta lettin' company enter first."

Dick Spain and Sheriff Fred Kyle both looked a little pale now. But there was nothing they could do unless they wanted to argue matters with that chill-eyed old ranny who had the cold drop. And somehow the idea of arguing with Frosty Dolan just now did not please either Spain or Kyle.

Spain flung open the screen door, stepped into a long, neatly kept living room, the fat sheriff almost treading on his dragging spurs. Frosty Dolan came in behind them, sidled past the staring pair and snatched their holsters free of weapons before either the sheriff or Spain knew what was happening.

Spain lurched around, swearing thickly as he half crouched. But old Frosty Dolan grinned impudently at him, sidled to an open window, and tossed four six-shooters out into the yard.

"You can gather them things up as you leave," Frosty said coldly. "At that, I'm doin' you back shootin' horse thieves a favor. If you had yore guns on you might make some fool play an' get killed when the boss comes in."

"Men have tried buckin' me before, Dolan, an' wound up in hell for their pains," Dick Spain snarled. "If this is a joke Kyle an' me will laugh an' forget it. But if yuh're up to some trick, Dolan, you better think twice before you spring anything too raw."

"Dick is right, Dolan," the sheriff said with more pluck than showed in his pale, uneasy eyes. "If this is a joke, then that's all right. But if—if yuh're tryin' to run a sandy of some sort yuh better go careful. Yuh're tamperin' with the law, feller."

"Uh-huh, a law that backs up Dick Spain an' his back-shootin' pack o' Walkin' M horse thieves," old Frosty snorted. "But I'll let the boss handle things from here on out. Here he comes. Gents, meet the Star Seven owner."

THROUGH a middle door into the room stepped a lean-flanked square-shouldered cowboy who moved with the easy stride of a big cat.

Dick Spain and the sheriff were staring in silence, eyes raking the newcomer from dusty boots to low-slanted black John B. The sheriff and Dick Spain did not miss the fact that the twin guns at those lean hips were slung in a mighty professional manner. Nor did they miss the fact that the lean brown face was the face of a young hombre.

But there was a hard slant to the young man's thin mouth that was a little too grim. And the lights in those coldly stabbing black eyes that raked out from beneath the lowered hat-brim were the eyes of a man who was not thinking pleasant things.

"Remember me?" The young fellow's voice hit out at the sheriff and

Dick Spain, a cold, flat-toned voice that brought the two staring hellions to stiff attention.

"I see you doublecrossed me, Frosty, and took their guns," the cold voiced cowboy was saying now. "I told you to leave these two with their stingers *not* pulled, didn't I?"

"Hell, son, killin' these two ain't the main thing," old Frosty chuckled coldly. "Look at their faces. See that look in their eyes? Let 'em squirm a while, boy, before you leap-tromp 'em.

"They're tryin' to think, son. I want you to watch the snakes close when they finally figger out who you are. Killin' these two would spoil all the fun right now."

"Who—who are you?" Dick Spain croaked. "Damn it, young feller, what's the meanin' of this. I never laid eyes on you before. Neither did Fred Kyle. What—"

Dick Spain's voice ended in a wheezing sort of croak. He felt the big sheriff beside him shuddering, heard the sheriff's breath take on an asthmatic gurgling. That tall young fellow before them had lifted a lean hand, shoved the dusty black Stetson far back on raven-hued hair.

Now the sheriff and Dick Spain were staring at a high, intelligent forehead that was white in comparison to the rest of the lean, cold brown face. Squarely in the center of that white forehead was a big, deeply-ridged scar. The scar formed the letter T.

"Gawd!" Sheriff Fred Kyle's voice was a sobbing gasp. "Spain look at that. This feller is Greg Nelson, the button we—er—the kid yuh branded one night over four years ago."

"And don't forget the eight thousand dollars he split with you an' the other boot lickers who take his orders," Greg Nelson said with dangerous calm.

"You come here lookin' for your Walkin' M horses, Spain. Well, I took them horses, sold 'em to the same crooked trader you sell stolen stuff to. I told him yuh wanted top prices an' the fool paid it. But I'm not a thief, Spain. What I done was collect the eight thousand you owed me, plus interest. Now, damn yuh, I'm collectin' another debt. Remember the night you an' them other two shot the life from Sam Nelson, my Father?"

CHAPTER V

Killers on the Prod

DICK SPAIN and the blubbering, badly shaken sheriff were never sure how they got out of the Star Seven living room and up into their saddles. They had a vague memory of seeing old Frosty Dolan leap up at Greg Nelson, carry the cold-eyed youth back and down in a sudden wild rush. Then Frosty Dolan had yelled something at Dick Spain and the pot-bellied sheriff—something about getting to hell out of there while their hides were all in one piece.

Now, roaring along a twisting trail that cut through the meadow below the Star Seven ranchhouse, Dick Spain and the sheriff were beginning to regain their wits. The crisp night air beat their faces, stung color back into cheeks that had been drawn and white. Neither the sheriff nor Dick Spain had bothered to hunt those six-shooters that had been taken away from them and thrown out the Star Seven window.

"Spain, what are we gonna do?" The sheriff's voice was cracked, jittery. "That damned Nelson kid has got the deadwood on us. He would a' killed us both if Dolan hadn't tackled him when he did."

"Give a man time to think, can't yuh?" Dick Spain snarled. "We'll get to the Walkin' M, first thing we do. A few drinks, an' time to think, is all I need!"

The two left the meadow now, spurring up along a pine-covered slope. A full moon came edging up out of the east, painting the slopes and dark, silent forests with a strange, red looking light.

Dick Spain shivered from something besides the chill mountain air, cursing the sheriff under his breath.

Kyle was crouched and shuddering as though he expected death itself to leap at him out of the blackness that was the shadows beneath the great pines.

The sheriff and Dick Spain both leaped half out of saddles when a voice hailed them as they rode out into a little clearing. Their hands whipped instinctively to holsters, and both men were cursing in wild alarm as their groping fingers found soft leather instead of cold gun-butts.

"Hey, don't draw on us!" that voice squalled from just ahead. "Boss, it's Sim Wingate an' me."

DICK SPAIN sank back into the saddle, sweat beading his thick-skinned face despite the chill of the night. Sheriff Kyle seemed ready to spill from the saddle as he watched Con Jetson and Sim Wingate come loping from a clump of second growth yonder across the little clearing.

"Spooky as you two act, I see yuh've already heard, Boss," Con Jetson's thin voice rapped out as he and lank Sim Wingate reined in.

"Ain't it hell?" Sim Wingate gulped. "Boss, what'll we do?"

The sheriff and Dick Spain exchanged uneasy glances, then began studying the drawn, obviously uneasy faces of the two men before them.

"What the hell are you two yammerin' about?" Dick Spain snarled, his pent-up emotions turning suddenly to cold anger.

"Huh?" Con Jetson gulped. "Say, the way you two acted, Wingate an' me naturally figgered that yuh'd had a run-in with some of them posses that are out huntin' us."

"Posses?" the big sheriff yodled. "Wh-what yuh talkin' about? What would a posse be huntin' *us* for?"

"That Frosty Dolan over at the Star Seven has throwed us for a loss," Sim Wingate gulped. "Dolan has been talkin' quietlike to a bunch of the ranchers around here. An' this afternoon a bunch of said ranchers dropped down on Snuffer Cole, Loop Snodgrass, Tuck Owens, an' them others that was guardin' them broncs we stole in these three raids lately."

"What?" Dick Spain yelled.

"It's a fact, Boss," Con Jetson rasped. "An' them ranchers hung Snuffer Cole, Loop Snodgrass, Tuck Owens an' the other two boys that was at our hideout camp."

"But the hell of it is, some of them fellers got scairt an' talked before they was hung," Sim Wingate gulped. "Boss, this whole damned country is teemin' with gents who want to stick our necks in nooses."

"We better ride!" the flabby sheriff squealed like a stuck shoat. "Spain, our only chance is to get across the Utah line."

"Kyle's right, Boss," Con Jetson said nervously. "Sim an' me like to got killed when we went down to the ranch. The Walkin' M ranchhouse is surrounded by posse men who are hidin' in the brush, watchin' for any of us that show up. Wingate an' me spotted them hidden fellers barely in time. As it was, they dusted our tails with slugs when we made a run for it."

Dick Spain sat there, rocking to and fro in the saddle like a sick man. Slowly the color drained from his coarse-featured face, leaving his small, green eyes to glow like breeze fanned coals in grey ashes.

Dick Spain's thick lips trembled open, but for a long moment the only sounds he could make were grunts and gasps, as if he were suffering some physical pain. Then those little green eyes were suddenly red-shot with hellish lights, and the thick-featured face of Dick Spain began twisting into a mask of insane rage.

When Spain found his voice at last it was to curse in a wild frenzy that caused his three cohorts to back their horses swiftly. In that moment Dick Spain was a mad man, and his three companions in crime exchanged quick glances that were laden with fear as well as uneasiness.

Con Jetson fished a quart bottle from the slicker-roll behind his sad-

dle, pried the cork out with a knife blade, and held the bottle toward Spain. The Walking M owner snatched the bottle, jammed the neck to his twisting, froth-flecked lips.

When Dick Spain lowered the bottle it was almost half empty. He sat there, head lowered and thrust forward above his thick, lumpy shoulders. Dick Spain was panting hoarsely, and his body shuddered as if he were chilling, but the wild madness of that first rage was leaving his eyes. Those green eyes puckered into thin slits, and in the light of the full moon Dick Spain's features were a ghastly mask as he grinned a mirthless, death's head grin.

"So we're licked?" Spain's voice had the brittle snap of dry twigs breaking. "We've got to tuck our tails an' coyote, leavin' a ranch an' stock behind that's worth a fortune!"

"A man can't spend money in hell, Dick," the big sheriff shrieked. "What are we waitin' for?"

"We're waitin' for nothin'," Dick Spain laughed a ghastly laugh. "We're ridin' now, men, an' we'll be acrost the Utah line by daylight or a little after. But we're attendin' to one last chore before we quit this country."

"What the hell?" Con Jetson rapped. "Boss, yuh better git a tail-hold on yore wits. Best thing we can do is get out, an' to hell with chores."

"But this chore needs doin'," Dick Spain said slowly. "Besides, it's on our way to the Utah line."

"An' that chore?" Sim Wingate asked uneasily.

"Killin' the feller responsible for the mess we're in!" Spain's rage flared again, making his voice shake. "Kyle an' me could tell you two somethin' mighty interestin', but we won't waste time on that. All I'm sayin' now is that Frosty Dolan don't own the Star Seven."

"What difference would that make?" Con Jetson snapped. "Dolan stirred up a mess that'll have our necks in nooses if we don't high-tail."

"We're hightailin'," Dick Spain rasped. "But we're ridin' past the Star Seven on our way. Frosty Dolan an' the son who owns that spread will be there. Con, you and Sim will savvy things better when you see the jasper who really owns the Star Seven. And when we look at that snake through one of the Star Seven winders, we'll be lookin' at him over gun sights. Come on, we're wastin' time."

CHAPTER VI

T Stands for Trouble

YOUNG NELSON tried to grin but the attempt was a failure. Greg stood now on wide planted feet, looking down at little old Frosty Dolan, who cussed him up one side and down the other.

"Wanted to smear yoreself with skunk oil by killin' them two when they wasn't armed, huh?" Frosty ranted. "Fer two cents, yuh young heller, I'd larrup yuh with a doubled rope. Where the hell did you get yore confounded bushwhacker streak, huh?"

"Cool off, yuh old wart hog!" Greg snapped. "Hell, Frosty, I lost my head, that's all. I—was rememberin' how that Dick Spain shot my Dad that night. Dad was helpless, but that didn't stop Spain an' them other two."

"I know, Greg," Frosty said less severely. "Jest the same, you don't want to go takin' no bath in skunk soup. Killin' even snakes like that sheriff an' Dick Spain when they didn't have a chance ain't like Sam Nelson's boy."

"Yuh're right, old-timer," Greg nodded slowly. "And—well, thanks, Frosty, for stoppin' me. I reckon I'll have another chance at them two when things are more even."

"I doubt that," Frosty grinned suddenly. "No, don't blow up now, button. Hell, Dick Spain an' his bunch are a salty pack. Think I want to see yuh shot down by them mangy hellions?"

"I'm settlin' scores for Dad, Frosty," Greg said stiffly. "Don't try

any fool stunts like stoppin' me. I'll handle this."

"Maybe," Frosty Dolan chuckled wisely. "You see, Greg, I've been sorta talkin' things over with our neighbors around here. This afternoon a bunch o' the neighbors fogged down into the big sink where Spain's men was holdin' the horses Spain got in them three raids he pulled lately."

"Frosty Dolan, what have you done?" Greg said sharply. "If yuh've messed things up for me—"

"For Dick Spain, not you," Dolan cut in. "Spain's men that was with them stolen horses got hung. Two of the sons talked plenty before the hangin', an' right now this whole range is alive with gents who have got the hang-noose rash in a bad way. If them fellers don't corral Spain an' that badge-toter I'll eat my hat."

WHITE-FACED, Nelson stood there, trying to fight the rage that was gnawing at his brain. Old Frosty Dolan meant all right, Greg kept telling himself over and over. Frosty had been like a father to him these four years. It wouldn't do to say hard things to him, even if the danged old coot had played hell with Greg's plans. Trembling, sweat beading his lip and forehead, Greg Nelson sank into a chair, trying to think, trying to keep from cussing old Frosty Dolan out.

How long he sat there, Greg never knew. He was dimly aware that Dolan left the room, blowing his nose rather loudly. Then after a while Frosty was back, dumping an armload of pine knots down beside the big fireplace.

Greg Nelson watched the old fellow start a fire, and was swallowing the last of his rage, ready to say something that would take the hurt look off Frosty Dolan's face. But as Greg's lips opened a window down the room exploded under a slashing gun barrel and the door across the room whipped open.

Greg Nelson saw Dick Spain coming through that broken window, a gun in each fist, eyes looking as they had looked that night four years ago. Then Dick Spain was shooting, and guns were crashing from the doorway across the room.

Greg Nelson felt a slug bite through the side of his neck, felt himself going backward, carrying the big rawhide seated chair with him. But even as he went over Greg Nelson saw old Frosty Dolan spread out there on the hearth, one gnarled hand poked into the fire he had started.

That flashing glimpse of old Frosty falling ripped the shock from Greg Nelson's brain. Greg raked the guns from his holsters, cursing through locked teeth as he bucked the chair off. Blood was spurting from the hole in his neck, dying his shirt an ominous color.

Greg Nelson laughed without knowing it, his voice shrill and gritty above the slam of guns. Now Greg's thumbs caught gnarled hammers, flipped them back, let them fall. Yonder in the doorway, big Sheriff Fred Kyle shuddered and sank down, screaming hoarsely.

Con Jetson and Sim Wingate were shuttling along the wall, swearing above the beat of hot guns because Greg Nelson was presenting a shifting, weaving target. Nelson caught Con Jetson in the face with a brace of slugs, saw the thin, gunswift killer go down.

Then Greg Nelson was falling, breath driven from his lungs by a pain that seared his chest. But Greg cocked himself back against the overturned chair, grinned through a smear of blood, sweat and powder stains that smeared his face.

Sim Wingate was trying to scrooch his lank body down behind a couch over yonder. But the tall back of the couch was only a tight strip of rawhide.

Greg Nelson flung a pair of slugs at the couch, aiming for them to rip through the rawhide into Sim Wingate. But a slug hammered Greg across the shoulder just as he triggered—a slug that came slanting in from the side.

Greg twisted as he fell, saw Dick Spain's big form loom through the

swirling powder fumes like some legless creature that floated through space. Greg's head was spinning, and he knew that he was about to pass out; but he kept his eye on that swimming form, watching the rage-distorted face with its thick, peeled-back lips and red-rimmed green eyes.

"I'm usin' that T brand I burned on yore head for a target," Dick Spain squalled. "T stands for thief, damn you! I'm sendin' you to hell with this shot!"

"T stands for thief—or trouble," Greg husked, and stabbed his guns up and out, cursing the way they wabbled.

His thumb flicked the hammers, then he began laughing crazily at the way Dick Spain's big teeth sprayed out past his curling lips like bits of blasted pottery.

Greg Nelson was still laughing that crazy laughter when he squared around, hot guns centering on the couch where he had last seen Sim Wingate. But he did not drop the spiked hammers he had dogged back. Sim Wingate lay draped over the top of the couch, and Greg was trying to figure it out when old Frosty Dolan crawled around the overturned chair, grinning twistedly at him.

"Take it easy, button," old Frosty said huskily. "Damn it, my plans for havin' them sons stretch rope misfired. But the snakes are busy now tradin' their guns for soot rakes an' cinder forks, Greg. Jest lay back, button, an' rest a spell. I'm nicked in the off hind leg, an' the crease I got, first crack outa the box, makes my head ache some. But I'll wrap up them hurts, Greg. So T stands for trouble as well as thief, huh? Funny, but I never thought o' that. Here, I'll tear this shirt into strips, Greg. Have you fixed before—"

Greg Nelson grinned wearily, lay back on the floor. He was out cold when Frosty Dolan finished a crude but effective job of bandaging.

Frosty Dolan blew on his fire-scorched fingers, squinted hard old eyes across the room at the sprawled bodies. The sheriff's big star winked in the lamplight, and Frosty grinned a wolf-mean grin.

"Even the badge yuh disgraced is grinnin' at yore dead carcass, Mr. Lawman," Frosty grunted. "I didn't help much, for I only got a whack at that Sim Wingate son. But you an' them other hellions hubbed a law that you couldn't crook—the law of smokin' lead!"

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IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

RIDIN' THE RIO

A Novelette of Border Badmen

BY SYL MACDOWELL

Blood Water

"Run for it, Dave!" he shouted through pain-torn lips

Range-Hogs Hold a Whip Hand Over South Fork County, Until Dave Logan's Gun Hand Limbers Up to a Settlement in Lead

By WILLIAM McCLELLAND

Author of "Thunderbird," "Pioneer," etc.

DAVE LOGAN was backed against his own corral. The railings were sliding under his hands. He knew the dust would come up and meet him anytime now. He was going down on his own ground, a bloody rag of a man. A man who had been standing under the skin-bursting lash of Ed Jordan's blacksnake until his legs, or the corral fence wouldn't hold any longer.

"Pore it to him, Ed!" yowled Big French, a hairy hunch-shouldered giant. The eighteen-foot whip coiled around Logan's throat and spun him face down in the alkali dust. The big whip hissed out again and the cannon crack of the buckskin lash cut another six inch strip out of Logan's back.

Jordan straightened up. Pushed the big hat back and wiped the sweat off his face with one rolling motion of his blue-sleeved arm.

"Well, there's one hombre that'll high-tail it when he kin git up!" He

sent a stream of tobacco juice splattering over the huddled rancher. "When the Rollin' M wants a spring, no one hoss spread is gonna squat on it—and live."

"Yuh shore kin peel 'em down with that blacksnake, Ed," said "Cold" Burns admiringly as he holstered his single-action and gathered up the reins of the bay. "I never seen a man so handy."

Burns was a narrow-shouldered wasp of a man. His nervous play with the reins indicated the deadly gun speed for which he was almost too well known.

"Time to git to work, boys, now that we had our fun," ordered Jordan briskly. "Cold, you git busy cuttin' fence, and French, you haze them animals out of the lower pasture, and make their tails sail over the north ridge. I'll take care of the shack."

THE hard-faced men swung their horses. Jordan's spurs jingled toward the two-room cabin crouched under the big cottonwoods. Ed Jordan's huge hands swung the coal-oil can in a half circle in Logan's neat kitchen. Then he tossed a flaming handfull of meadow hay into the center of the room. The flame flared across the clean floor.

Snarling, Jordan watched the fire rush the rafters in the barn. The heavy-shouldered man smiled when a blazing cinder fell on Dave Logan's back and ignited a dry tatter of the blood-soaked shirt.

"Yeah," he sneered at the unconscious man, "yuh're the last waddy in these parts that'll git ambitions to build a cow spread. Yuh're lucky to be a-livin'—if yuh are."

Ed Jordan, owner of the Rolling M, was a range-hog. He had driven every small rancher out of the South Fork country. Owning the law, he ruled savagely. Dave Logan was the last man between him and complete domination of the South Fork range.

Jordan's two hundred pounds swung the heavy corral gate easily. The heavy-hipped, paunchy rancher worked around the horses. Uncoiling the whip as he went, his beady black eyes measured the value of Logan's saddle string.

Suddenly the long blacksnake streamed out. The lash bit into the near horse's rump. Squealing, wall-eyed, the horse lashed out with both steel-shod hoofs. The whip exploded again.

Manes tossing, whinnying, crowding, Logan's cavvy burst through the gate. The dust of their passing billowed in the smoke of the burning buildings. Shearing past Logan's huddled form, they headed for the open range.

Jordan watched the roaring flames with heavy satisfaction. Then he mounted the roan horse. Jordan's long shank and five-point rowel drove cruelly into the horse's belly. The hammerhead churned gravel and pounded through the gate at a dead run.

Three buzzards drifted lazily in narrow circles high above two thin streamers of smoke. Jud Doyle pushed his tired mare without crowding her. He had watched that smoke and had raced the buzzards for two hours.

Jud Doyle had seen ominous threads of smoke many times in the last ten years. Small ranches being burned. And now Ed Jordan and his wild raiders were smoking out Dave Logan!

Jud Doyle and Tom Logan, Dave's father, had ridden West together. Fifteen years ago Tom Logan had been gored on the open range. Doyle had kept an eye on Logan's orphan boy. He had watched over him like a father.

The big bald-headed birds were speeding down; banking dizzily as they plunged!

Jud Doyle swore and lifted the mare into an easy run. He was unlimbering his long Sharps as he crested the ridge. His shrill cow yell rose reverberatingly. The mare slithered down the slope and then pounded across the valley. Doyle's keen old eyes hardened as his quick glance took in the ruined ranch.

Three years of hard work gone in half a day!

In the ranchyard the mare slid and snorted. The range veteran, dismounting on the fly, was running; chaps flopping, waving the old Sharps. The buzzards waddled back and turned lurchingly. One by one they spread wings for their slow takeoff.

"Thank God," panted old Jud, "them birds had no time to poke a beak into the boy, if he was a dead 'un."

Dave Logan was moaning and rolling his head as Doyle knelt beside him. The old hand cursed viciously, eased Logan gently to a sitting position and tilted a bottle to his lips.

With a practiced hand, Jud Doyle swabbed the rawly bleeding welts on Logan's back. He put his own shirt on the semi-conscious man. Then Doyle whistled up the mare and then loaded the beaten rancher into the saddle. Easily he vaulted behind him.

"Sorry, old girl," his voice was caressing, "but yuh just gotta carry double."

SIX weeks of venison and Old Doyle's solicitous profanity found Dave Logan limberly squatting on the top rail of Jud's horse corral.

The smooth-shaven young rancher had recovered quickly. His lean body was lithe strength in repose. Years on the range had weathered his bronzed face. His well formed jaw jutted as he spoke.

"Well, Jud, I'll be leaving pronto. Gotta make a little talk with Jordan."

He paused and tilted his grey Stetson back on his brown head. His wide grey eyes judged the horses in the corral. They lingered on a deep chested sorrel.

"Mind if I ride yore sorrel hoss?" he asked.

Doyle slouched beside him and gnawed at his plug.

"Boy, yuh're a fool," he said. "You can't lick Ed Jordan and the Rollin' M. Yuh better stay here and hunt hosses with me."

Brows scowling, Dave Logan's long brown hand fingered his scarred neck. "It's me or Ed Jordan, and there's gonna be peace on South Fork. They run me offen water they don't need jest like they burned out every cow hand that wanted to git a start for hisself."

Logan flipped his brown butt and slid down the fence into the corral. Shaking out his rope, he tossed a narrow loop over the head of the sorrel that was trying to bury himself deep in the remuda bunched at the far end of the corral.

The sorrel swelled as the dispossessed rancher cinched the saddle down.

"Yuh ornery ol' fool," Dave Logan grunted as he butted the horse's belly with his knee.

Zing!

The bullet jumped Logan's ten gallon. Seared jaggedly in wornly polished leather of the cantle. The sorrel humped, snorted and sidled into the corral fence. The saddle rolled.

Dave Logan was running for cover as the flat report of a rifle reverberated deafeningly in the canyon. Jud Doyle's old Sharps exploded from the barn door.

As he reached the old horse hunter's cabin, Logan saw the black silhouette of a man reeling on the rim rock. Suddenly the bushwhacker toppled forward! His pain screams ended only when the thud echoed dully as he struck the bottom of the cliff. The loose talus began to slide. Then there was silence in the canyon. Old Jud only needed one shot anyhow, thought Dave Logan as he cradled his own Winchester.

Every sense alert, Logan waited. A half hour passed. Then, dodging and running swiftly, he made for the barn.

"What do yuh make of it, Jud?"

"Them killers from the Rollin' M are gonna have yore hide, boy. They don't want no talk in the county, 'less they're a-doin' it. Ed Jordan kin blot yore brand. Run off yore hosses, an' use the water hole yuh was ready to prove up on. But I figger he's plumb disgusted he didn't

shoot yore insides out after he gave yuh that beatin'."

Logan's only reply was a single burst of profanity.

Crouched in the hay, his burned grey eyes scanning the western rim of the canyon wall, the old man went on:

"Dave, yore pappy never woulda let my boy go pokin' into a mess o' rattlesnakes, alone. Besides"—his voice was rasping—"no tin-horn kin come a shootin' up Jud Doyle's hoss camp like it was some whiskey-hell down in Halfway!"

Across the meadow the early dusk trailed the rising mist. The polished sunlight made a jumbled fire of the rimrock. Carefully, the lean young rancher and the old horse hunter worked toward the place where the bushwhacker had fallen.

THEY found him half buried in the slide at the foot of the cliff. His head a crimson pulp. Logan identified the intricate stitch on the high-heeled boots as belonging to Slim Johnson, one of Jordan's most cold-blooded killers.

"Jud, yuh ain't gonna butt into this here fight. I'm goin' it alone."

"Come on, boy, grab this pack rat by the heels, an' we'll find a place to put him."

Dave Logan paused as he shoveled a shallow grave. "I'm gonna hunt out Ed Jordan tonight if I hafta go into the Rollin' M ranchhouse to smoke him out!"

The old-timer drenched an eight-inch stone and rolled his chew.

"Well, I'm gonna ride along with yuh, and see no one shoots yuh in the back."

The moon was waning as the two riders dismounted and tied their horses in the willows. The Rolling M bunkhouse was a dim blur crouched in the shadows of the big barns. The only sounds were those of stock feeding and the occasional *chomp* of the animals in the box-stalls. An owl hooted and both men flattened into the cook-house shadow.

The rusty hinges of the cook-house shivered shrill sound through the night. An endless interval of silence. The cook's rumble rattled the loose pane in the window above his head. The flooring creaked under the high-heeled boots swiftly, quietly moving through the low-raftered room.

The cookie's snores stopped suddenly. He had felt the pressure of a .45 in his belly before. He held his breath and saw the black shadow of the man above him.

"Where's Jordan?" Logan whispered. "Come on, give me a straight answer or I'll let yuh have one."

"Him and six riders left yesterday for Twenty-Mile," came the cook's shuddered answer.

"Bring in that old lass-rope, Jud," said Logan huskily. "The Rollin' M ain't gonna eat on time tomorra."

Tying the cook to the bed and stuffing a gag took only a moment for the rope-handy Logan. Silently the two men worked back to their horses.

The sky was grey as Logan and Doyle loped across the flats north of the Rolling M ranch, grimly intent on covering ground.

"We better hole up today," the old horse hunter started to say. "I ain't got no—"

Doyle's mare dropped forward. A sickening crack made both riders instantly aware that the mare's leg was broken. Doyle rolled free. The mare threw herself over on her side.

Quickly, between quiet bursts of profanity, Jud worked at the cinch. Dave Logan wheeled his horse. He called back to the perspiring horse hunter:

"I'm ridin' back to borrow a hoss from the Rollin' M."

In a narrow meadow above the main buildings of the Rolling M, Logan sighted a bunch of horses. He swung the sorrel and let him feel steel to clear the creek. Shaking out his lass-rope, he circled the herd and picked a tall rangy black.

The sorrel flattened into a dead run. The wide loop swung slowly. The big black snorted, wheeled, and broke for the knoll that hid the Rolling M headquarters. Dave swore

and fed the sorrel the spurs. Couldn't have that jughead bust a fence. Some old hand might be around and come out for a look-see. Slowly the sorrel closed the gap. Logan's rope curved out and settled. Dallying fast, he brought the black to a stop just under the crest of the knoll.

When the Rolling M horse was under Jud Doyle's heavy rig, Doyle unlimbered his .45. He almost wept as he put the gun between his mare's ears. The crippled horse raised her head. Doyle touched the trigger. With the roar of the gun, the mare's head dropped with a thud to the ground.

"Come on, boy," said the old man chokingly. "Let's git out of here. I hated to risk that shot for fear the hull Rollin' M'd come a-tearin' over the hill, but I couldn't see old Bess suffer!"

Logan replied quietly. "Yuh wouldn't have been the man I know yuh are, if yuh hadn't fixed her up."

As Jud Doyle was swinging into the saddle, the big black buckled. The horse reared, threshed, screamed. Its neck stretched out. Blown screams blended with the ugly *thud* of a distant rifle.

Doyle's foot was twisted in the ox-bow as the horse went down. He was trying to avoid the wildly threshing hoofs. Dave Logan turned in his saddle.

Four hundred yards away, Ed Jordan and six of his men were rounding a rocky point! Quirts flailing, they thundered into the flat.

"Run for it, Dave!" shouted Doyle through pain-torn lips.

"Like hell I will!"

Dave Logan's right hand was jumping like a longhorn as he thumbed the hammer of the .45. He ran with swift jingling strides to the helpless man's side. His left hand was slashing at the stirrup leather with his bowie.

Big French's gun-crazy horse, running wild, was half screening Logan's efforts to free the veteran's hand. French had sprawled headlong with Logan's first shot. He doubled up in the open, beating the ground with clenched fists. Cold Burns was fighting profanely to free his Winchester where his horse had fallen on it. Ed Jordan and his boys were scattering under the deadly fire from young Logan's single-action.

Stumbling under the weight of Doyle's body Dave Logan ran toward his horse. A .45 slug smashed into his left arm. The bone-smashing impact of the bullet sprawled him over the injured man. With a twist, quick as a steer's, he was on his feet, with Doyle caught up under his right arm.

He swung the old fellow into the saddle and doubled up behind him. The sorrel horse leaped under the spurs. Logan swung the .45 into action. Old Doyle headed the double-burdened horse toward a boulder-strewn butte a quarter of a mile away.

Zam!

LOGAN'S right leg burned like a branding iron. An ounce of lead had sheared through his batwing and grazed his leg! Whoever was shooting that .45-70 knew his business. The sorrel swerved wildly up the boulder-cut face of the hill. Doyle was thanking his Maker aloud for the three hundred yards between them and the Rolling M guns.

The .45-70 crashed again. The sorrel stumbled, staggered and went down. Doyle worked feverishly to clear Logan's .30-30 under the fender. He took a leaning rest across the dead horse's neck and levered savagely.

Three shots slammed into Jordan's bunched riders. A cloud of dust cushioned up as two horses went down. The others scattered for cover.

"Hit bad, Dave?" called Jud through grimly drawn lips.

"Smashed a bone in my arm, but only creased my leg," grunted Dave from a wedge of rock to the old-timer's left. "We kin hold them spring-grabbin' land-hogs to dark," he added, confidently.

The sun beat down. It took six painful hours to crawl the long hun-

dred yards to the jagged out-croppings of rock on the crown of the butte. The heat waves shimmered. Five black specks with tails of dust appeared in the mouth of a distant draw. More of Jordan's men!

With bloodshot eyes fixed between swollen lids, Logan watched. He chewed the cotton in his mouth. The brown paper cigarettes seared his throat.

Stiffly crouched in the hot shadow of the sun-baked rock old Doyle peered down. One of Jordan's men circled out of the cottonwoods along the creek-bed. He rode south.

"Goin' after chuck," Logan's voice creaked.

"Dave," Doyle groaned, "yuh're gonna have to cut this here boot off. I'm gittin' kinda soft, I reckon."

Logan inched himself along, keeping low under the jagged ledge of rock. The pain in his left arm caused sharp ripples of muscle to rise along his firm jaw. He opened his stock-knife with his teeth and set its keen edge on the shining bulge of Doyle's old Justins. The boot parted along the seam. Swollen discolored flesh appeared.

"Kinda techy, ain't it," said Dave when the old-timer flinched.

"Yeah, it's a mite uncomf'table, and yuh don't hafta go a-pokin' it to see how much I kin take," grunted the tough old horse hunter as Dave gingerly removed his sock.

"Slap a splint on her, while I keep an eye on them there polecats below," ordered Doyle.

WORKING as quickly as his one hand would permit, Dave Logan bound the smashed ankle in a rough splint. Then he worked back to his niche commanding a view of the north slope of the butte.

Two hundred yards down the slope, one of Jordan's men was zigzagging to closer cover. Logan brought down the .45 and fanned once. A spout of dust burst at the runner's feet. The Rolling M rider dodged back.

Logan's big gun crashed again. The man stopped. His arms flung out as he pivoted. Legs kicking, he somersaulted twice and piled into a brittle boulder face up. The sun glinted on his belt buckle.

"Yuh're shore wicked with that shootin' iron, son," admired the grizzled old cowpoke.

The sun sank. Doyle was moaning feverishly now, cursing the well-ridden Jordan men. It relieved the pain, he said, when he got a clear shot. Logan counted his shells—six left!

"How much ammunition yuh got, Jud?"

"'Bout a dozen rounds, I figger," came the reply.

Logan, with an appraising eye on the ground he meant to cover, said.

"Well, soon as the sun sets good, I'm gonna work down to my saddlebags. We ain't got enough lead left to more'n stop one good rush—if them prairie dogs had nerve enough to try it."

"Naw, boy, yuh ain't gonna do nuthin' of the kind. 'Tween sunset and moon-up yuh're gonna work down this here butte and borry a hoss from the Rollin' M. Ride like hell to Bard Jones' spread and let him know how Jud Doyle's gittin' along. He's been itchin' to tangle with Jordan's outfit for plenty long."

Slowly Logan nodded agreement, and with the dark he holstered his empty Colt and handed Jud his three remaining shells. As they clasped hands, Logan caught the gleam of Old Jud's teeth.

"So long," they both said.

The grizzled old horse hunter watched the vague blur of Logan as he inched away. Then he lost sight of him. His keen eyes searched the slope.

Faintly the jibbered yap of a coyote rode the wind. The cool night breeze made the injured man shudder.

"Slicker than an Injun," he whispered.

His rifle spurted a blaze of flame. Eight flashes and a rattled roll of gunfire answered him.

"I figger I kin waste one more, Davy, so's yuh kin keep them pole-

cats spotted." The old man's neck swelled as pain shot through his smashed ankle.

The Rolling M horses were ground-hitched in an open grove. The moon was swinging high. The clear moonlight outlined every detail of the place. Against the trunk of a tree on the other side of the clearing, squatted the Rolling M guard. He was lazily smoking.

Only one load for the Colts and I'd be on my way, thought Dave Logan. He inched soundlessly toward the nearest horse. The animal did not move as he ran his hand along her neck and looped up the reins. With his right hand on the horn he started to swing into the saddle. The heavy rig rolled under his weight. The cinch had been loosened! The horse snorted and backed away.

The cowpoke jumped to his feet. "What the hell's wrong with yuh, Baldy?" he exclaimed as he pigeon-toed toward the disturbed animal.

Logan crouched back into the willows. The puncher put his hand on the horse's rump. Glancing up, he saw Logan. A burst of gunfire echoed from the butte.

The waddy flashed for his gun. "Stick 'em—"

LOGAN, diving forward, crashed his shoulder into the man's chest. Stumbling back, the cowhand's gun crashed. The slug tore into the ground.

Logan's right hand streaked up. His long-bladed clasp knife glittered in the moonlight. He swung viciously, and crowded the puncher with his left shoulder. Had to keep this waddy so busy he couldn't unlimber that gun of his.

The gun roared beside his head. He slammed his ringing head into the cursing cowpoke's face. Logan wrenched his knife hand out of the puncher's grasp.

The two panting men threshed deep into the willows. Logan was weakening. He felt his heel catch in a snag. He thought of Doyle alone back there on the butte and twisted viciously.

He was going down! The wiry puncher on top of him. The earth crashed solidly against him.

The sky was greying when Dave Logan opened his eyes. A heavy weight was pressing against his chest. A man—dead! He recognized the dead man as Pedro Gomez, Ed Jordan's horse breaker. A vicious, horse-beating range rat.

Rolling the Mexican over, Logan found his knife wedged to the haft in the Mex's ribs. He pulled the knife from the wound as he listened for the sound of firing from the butte. No sound.

He stripped the dead man's full cartridge-belt and worked cautiously down to the creek, where he washed the dried blood from his face and arms. Quickly readjusting the bandages on his arm, he wormed his way back through the willows. Now to get back to Doyle and find out the reason for the silence.

The Rolling M horses were gone. Logan's narrowed eyes swept upward to the gnarled limb of a stunted live-oak. Dangling from a short rope, slowly swung a bloody bundle. It was Jud Doyle's body!

A blinding, killing rage swept over Logan. The tiredness left his body. He sprinted to the tree. Silently he lowered his friend's body to the ground. Dave's eyes flamed as he saw the grizzled old horse hunter's bloody mop of grey hair. They had clubbed him to death before they had swung him like a rustler.

"Butchered like a steer!" Logan cursed aloud. The hot wind rustled in the aspens as the young rancher set to work on the last sad rites for his old friend.

Slowly the stones mounted over the body of Jud Doyle. Each rock weighted the balance of his hatred. His thoughts flicked over the cost of his fight against the Rolling M. He was alone now.

Through drawn lips Logan spoke to the piled stones:

"Jud, there's gonna be some less sidewinders in this here country before sunup tomorra."

Five more miles! Only the thought

of Jud Doyle drove Dave Logan on. He fell flat in the sharp gravel of the dry-wash. Struggling, the wounded man fought for footing.

The best man with a rifle in the country was dead. The best friend a man ever had. The Rolling M guns had killed him. Cold Burns had eleven notches in those polished, balanced Colts of his. Jordan was even better with a six-gun than with a blacksnake!

THEY had jumped Dave Logan's water. Stolen his stock. Killed his friend. The sinking sun blazed under his closed eyelids. Deer flies swarmed over his bloody shirt.

Dave was stumbling on to his own death. Dimly he knew his own weakness would send him down in the face of such odds. A huge pile of granite was in front of him. He brushed at it with his hand. Cursing feebly, the dazed man worked around it.

The sinking sun flamed through the clear atmosphere.

Dusk was settling over the town of Halfway. At the end of the wide single street, seven riders raced. Rolling, swirling, and choking dust clouded behind them. One horse suddenly sunfished. The startled rider pulled leather as he slammed against the horn.

Ed Jordan swung around in his saddle. Booming, his guttural laugh resounded.

"You'll buy the first round for that, Danny!"

The man on the pitching, squalling, hump-backed horse cursed savagely. The yellow dust swallowed him up. The goaded horse and the leech on his back were vague shadows careening in the street.

Jordan and his riders pulled up at the rail of the Halfway Hell. Danny Peterson, a grease-streaked gunman, sent two slugs smashing into the Baird Mercantile sign.

Swaggering, the heavy-footed Jordan slammed the swinging doors of the saloon. He shoved a townsman in the face with his hairy hand. The man sprawled belly up on the floor.

"Pour one around for the boss of the South Fork!" The low-ceilinged room sent the roar of his voice shattering against the dirty windows.

The scrape of chairs and pound of booted feet answered his command. The loungers jumped to belly up to the bar when Ed Jordan ordered. The bartender sent full glasses sliding a dozen ways over the wet bar top.

Over the laughter of his hands' raucous voices, Jordan's voice bellowed.

"Fill 'em up agin for the sake of Skinner's Butte!"

Lowering his voice, the heavy featured Rolling M boss, said to Cold Burns, "Wonder where that yellerbellied Logan run to?"

"Probably crawled off somewheres to die," answered the leering narrow-faced gunman.

Jordan hitched his heavy gunbelts.

"I'd shore like to throw down on that slimy kid," he snarled, and then added regretfully: "Durn careless of me not to of finished him the day we burned him out."

"Aw," said Burns as he twisted his full glass, "Yuh got nothin' to worry about. The range is yore'n."

Jordan laughed. "Have another."

The barkeep scurried to answer the ugly rancher's bellow.

The flesh wound in Logan's leg was painfully swollen as he halted by the horse trough in front of Ed Smith's livery stable. Staggering, the grim-eyed man sloshed the cold water over his head and swore bitterly as he tugged at the boots on his aching feet. Inwardly he struggled against a heedless fury to rush to the kill.

As he pulled his Justins back on his dripping feet, the heavy shadow of a man loomed at the corner of the barn. Crouched, Logan waited. It was Bard Jones!

"Ed Jordan hung Jud Doyle this mornin'," Dave said grimly.

If he had smashed the big rancher with a single-tree, he could not have stopped him as suddenly. In the cloud-torn moonlight, the rancher's grey mustache twitched as his sound-

less lips worked. Whirling and hitching up his gun-belt the Crazy K owner started toward the row of false fronts a hundred yards down the street.

With Bard Jones' movement, electric pulsation of his burning hatred shot through Logan's body. His hand closed on the striding man's shoulder like a steel trap.

"This is my play, Bard!"

"Yore mother was a girl when Jud Doyle pulled me out of the Platte," Jones reminded witheringly.

Logan's grip did not relax. Something of the wild tension in the younger man's manner drove home. The big rancher hesitated and then Dave Logan was stalking down the street ahead of him.

PAST the long line of cowhorses hitched to the rail. Revealed in the splashed light of the saloons. Hidden in the shadows of the black building fronts. Logan strode on. His shoulder butted the swinging doors of the Halfway Hell.

Into the smoke-blurred light Logan plunged. Impervious to the rush of sound and the harsh-jangled beating of the tinny piano. Three Rolling M riders in a poker game near the doors, caught sight of the bloody weaving man. The game stopped. The silence ran like a grass-fire to the long bar. A barfly slithered away from a drunken prospect.

Jordan and Cold Burns were deep in conversation over their drinks. Silence. The dead silence of the wildest bar in the state cut off their words as though a slaughter house ax had fallen. Their faces searched the long mirror above the gleaming bottles behind the bar.

Jordan's back stiffened as his eyes focused on Logan's frozen tanned face. It was like reading his doom.

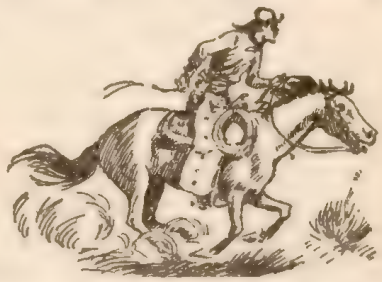
Cold Burns was easing himself down the bar. He swung slowly to face the man. The man whose friend he had clubbed to death with his reversed Colt. He remembered old Doyle choking Ed Jordan's thick, livid neck.

Only Dave Logan's eyes revealed the flame-red hatred that was searing through his brain. His revived body was limber and ready. When he went down, Ed Jordan would be on his way to hell.

Logan's words came through the static air of the saloon like the thudding blows of a pistol-whipping.

"Turn around, Jordan! Yuh're gonna feel hot lead in yore belly 'fore I blow the top of yore head off."

Jordan's throat was working as he swallowed and chewed his thick lips.



Power and speed were revealed in his heavy shoulders. The same power that had made him the savage range-grabbing cutthroat he had been for the past ten years on the South Fork. No man had crossed him and lived. Hunched like a squatted toad, he turned.

The swift vision of the charred and useless remains of his ranch buildings flashed through Dave Logan's brain. And over that grizzly picture swung the twisted, bloody body of Jud Doyle. He was going to kill this demon! He would see the blood curl out of the corners of that mouth. It would ooze slowly down that low forehead.

For an instant the three rigid men stood flexed and motionless. The choked sob of a dancehall girl moaned through the strained silence of the room.

Burns' clawed fingers flashed like forked flame. His guns belched wildly. Logan's first bullet had smashed into his throat! Convulsively reacting, the killer pulled the trigger. One slug tore a long jagged splinter from the floor. The other smeared a red blotch in the barkeep's face. Burns' head flopped forward. He slid down on the bar rail.

The floor was drenched with his gushing blood.

No one had followed Logan's draw. All there had been was a streak of orange flame. The smoke from his first shot hung like a grey balloon as a second shot stabbed through the shifting haze.

Jordan's drawn .45s, unfired, slithered from nerveless hands. The heavy confined explosions of the guns shook the frame building. Trembling overhead lamps shuddered dim light through the gunsmoke. Jordan watched the slow spread of blood on his own shirt front. The flame stabbed again.

The top of Jordan's head was a gaping red hole. He hit the floor like a dropped sack.

The crash of overturned chairs and the brittle crackle of breaking glass blended with the swift scrape of boots. A bullet tore into Logan's shoulder.

Logan slumped into the wall. His blazing single-action swung on the three Rolling M riders crouched, guns flaming, above the poker table. The tallest went down coughing and choking, an ounce of lead in his lungs.

TWO guns were roaring over Logan's head. Jones' squint eyes peered wickedly through the acrid smoke curling around his Stetson. A splintered crooked crack raced through the big mirror behind the bar. It hung out of its polished mahogany frame as though suspended in mid-air. Gathering speed it fell; crashing a gleaming shower of glass through the eddying gunsmoke.

A whiskey bottle on the bar burst. The amber fluid splashed over the rear end of the whimpering barfly, whose head was jammed between two big brass spittoons.

Danny Peterson, Rolling M gunman, revolved slowly down the center of the room. His hands pressed into his belly. He was opening and closing his mouth. Peterson's left spur hooked in Jordan's body. He tripped. stiffened and pitched to the floor. His right spur jingled as his leg twitched.

The slatted swinging-doors chattered with the detonations of the guns. A thin trickle of blood ran down Bard Jones' face. A grim smile edged the corners of his mouth.

Cross-fire from the south end of the room tore the hot Colt out of Logan's hand. Spinning, it curved and crashed into a spilled pile of poker chips on the floor.

Bard Jones' two guns swept in an arc. Both guns flamed twice. The cross-fire stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The last Rolling M gunman looked foolishly at the blood spurting from both his wrists.

On his hands and knees Logan was groping toward his empty gun. The ear-bursting roar of the guns ceased. A woman's hysterical giggle beat in Logan's ringing ears. Gentle hands were lifting him.

The drawling soft voice of Bard Jones was saying:

"Yuh done her, boy, yuh done her! The water's yore'n. An' old Jud Doyle's a-laughin' somewheres now."

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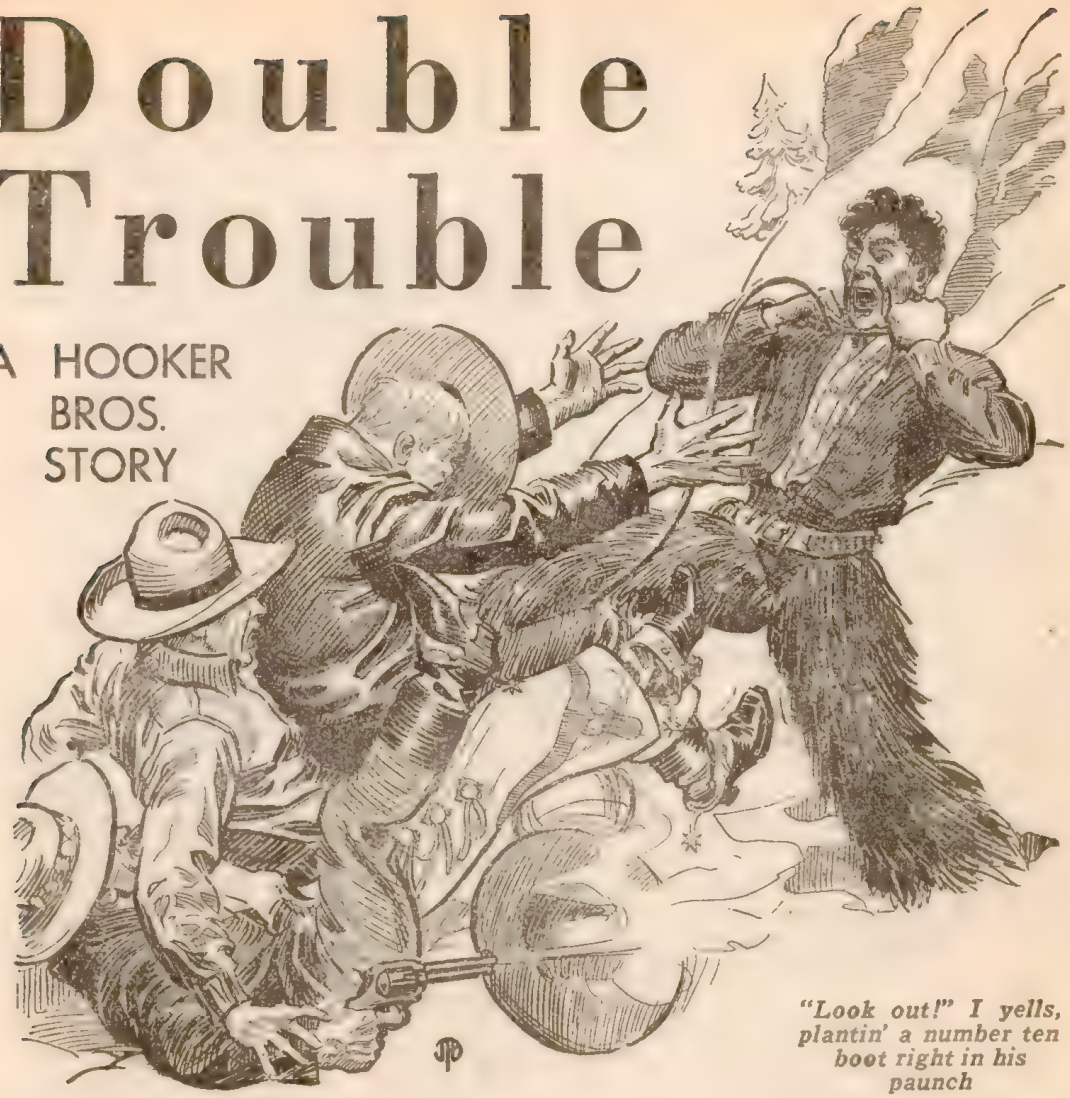
Double Trouble

A HOOKER BROS. STORY



"Look out!" I yells, plantin' a number ten boot right in his paunch

Pablo's Idea of Range Transit Helps Johnny Hooker Out of a Tight Spot When Wideloopers Make a Donkey Trader Out of Him!

By GRANT TAYLOR

Author of "Home on the Range," "Cows Only," etc.

IF folks'd jest git out an' round up all their troubles an' take a good squint at 'em, they'd danged soon find out they ain't more'n half of 'em what wears horns. 'Stead o' that they keeps millin' 'round an' countin' 'em, actin' jest like they're afraid they'll lose some. I allus notice they's a plumb good supply hangin' 'round the ranch gates bellerin' to git in, jest in case a feller runs a li'l short.

Yuh take me, Johnny Hooker, head pusher for the Hooker Bros. cow factory here in Canyon Lobo. I cuts all the big, he-troubles outa the herd, quick, an' gits my brand on 'em, after which I scatters the rest till they

gits growed up. An' what's more, I ain't widenin' the circle any to ketch any stray trouble which mebbe ain't located on the Hooker range.

Which ain't the way with li'l brother Stevie an' that big cowpoke o' our'n, One-Ton Benson. They believes in exercisin' their troubles so's they'll grow faster. It's right when we got all the dogies on the feed lot, an' plenty o' hay to tamp down 'em till grass time in the spring—it's right then that them two chases out a li'l trouble for exercise.

Me an' them two, an' ol' George, our cook, is all settin' in a li'l friendly game o' stud, which is 'bout the only chanct I got o' gittin' even with them no-'count bums, when li'l Stevie, he rears back on the rope.

"It's 'bout time," he yowls, "we gits rid of a lotta these here ol' pie-backed crowbaits we got an' git some good hosses, 'fore spring work starts."

"An' what's that gotta do with slippin' a li'l ante in?" I says, dealin' the li'l coot one off the bottom of the deck. "I sweetens the pot—"

"In which I concurs an' adds a coupla 'ayes'," bellers that big, overgrowed cowyap o' our'n, One-Ton Benson. "I ain't got a hammerhead in my string what ain't got a kidney-pie bigger'n a plate right under the saddle."

"Well, I do dee-clare," I says, sarcastic. "Ain't that extry-ordinery. Two-three hundred pounds o' dead meat floppin' 'round in the saddle is enough to make a mince pie on any hoss. 'Sides which, that ol' hull o' yore'n's got teeth in it."

AT which One-Ton begins to swell up an' git ready to start one o' them argyments. But me, I don't give 'im any chanct. I comes right back at them two.

"Trouble with you two saddle wallopers," I 'lucidates, "yuh gits the saddle all mistook for a bedroll an' goes to sleep. Won't be long till yuh'll hafta hobble yore stirrups to keep from fallin' off. Every time yuh pile on them ol' ponies they thinks they're packed, which they are."

Which is how I harpoons 'em when they tries to tell me, "Big Boy" Johnny Hooker, how to run the cow bizness. Me, I been squintin' at cow tracks ever sinct my ol' Dad showed me how to skin a beef in the dark an' not dull my knife. Right when them two oughta be relaxin' an' soakin' up a li'l re-creashun—an' watchin' the deal—it's right then they gotta haze out a li'l trouble.

They ain't tellin' me nuthin'; an' I reckon mebbe I ain't tellin' that li'l coot of a Stevie nuthin', either, 'count he goes right on, jest like he allus does—while I corrects a bob-tail flush.

"Jest the same," he argyfies, "a feller's gotta have 'nough hoss 'tween his laigs to keep from gittin' knock-kneed."

"How 'bout li'l Pablo's hoss?" I yelps, rakin' in the pot. "He ain't got no pie-back—"

'Bout that time the door busts open an' li'l Pablo hisself comes stampedein' in, all wild-eyed an' wavin' his arms worse'n a buck Injun at a treaty powwow.

"Thee horses, senor, they have vamose the rancho. When I would the remuda chase in, I no can find. I theenk maybe rustlers, they have steal—"

"Hooray, an' a coupla cheers," bellers that big slob of a One-Ton. "We still got friends."

"Which I allus did say us Hookers was lucky," yips lil'l brother Stevie. "An' I'm wishin' them hoss thieves the same."

"What in hell?" I bawls, gittin' suspicious. "I betcha you two shorthorns is mixed up in this. I'll hold out yore summer's wages to pay for 'em."

"Why, Johnny," yips that li'l smart aleck of a Stevie, "how injust yuh kin be—"

But I ain't waitin' to lissen. Me an' Pablo, we go bustin' out in a coupla feet o' snow. It's jest like Pablo yelped. We ain't got a danged hoss left. 'Stead o' hosses they's a coupla the dangest lookin' ol' sway-backed mules leanin' up ag'in the corral gate a feller ever flopped a peeper on.

"What in fourteen different kind o' hells is them?" I howls at li'l Pablo.

"Por Dios!" Pablo yelps. "Thees mules I have not see. Maybe eet ees for them we have swap."

"Nary a danged swap!" I bawls. "I gits them hosses back, pronto. Hey, you two no-'counts," I howls at Stevie an' One-Ton, "bust outa there an' git saddled." But right away I remembers they ain't nuthin' to saddle 'cept them two ol' hard-tails. "Jest the same we goes after them danged hoss thieves."

"Nuthin' doin'," squawks Stevie. "I ain't forkin' no ol' lop-ears. Me, I got a li'l pride."

"Same here," yelps One-Ton. "I ain't no doggoned mule-skinner."

I got a notion to wedge their danged horns 'tween the corral poles an' kick 'em 'til they bellers like a sour-milk calf.

ABOUT that time li'l Pablo, he throws 'nother fit.

"Sacre! Johnee, thee saddles, she ees vamose!"

It's right then I knows them two non-copoops ain't mixed up in it, 'count it's their saddles what's vamosed.

"Holy crabtree!" wails One-Ton, kickin' 'round in the snow where he allus piles his ol' hull up ag'in the corral. "Didn't even leave my hack an' cow hooks. Six months work shot to hell. Cripes!"

"How 'bout me?" bawls li'l Stevie, pawin' the snow. "I loses a hundred-dollar hull I wins at a rodeo. By golly, I hoofs it to Muley Hanks an' gits a hoss an'—"

"Come back here!" I yelps, reachin' out an' hookin' the toe o' my boot in his instep, which flops that li'l smart aleck so hard he roots up 'nough snow to decorate a Christmas tree.

"You an' One-Ton, yuh stays here an' forks hay to them dogies," I barks, "while me an' Pablo, we gits them hosses back."

"Yeah, an' while I feeds them two good-fer-nuthin's," ol' George gripes. "I'd ruther be snowed in with a gol-rammed Piute buck 'n be holed up with a coupla no good hossless cow-pokes."

But me, I ain't payin' no 'tenshun to sech yappin'. Me an' Pablo, we hightails it in the shed where we allus keeps our ol' hulls, an' it ain't long till we're forkin' them two ol' mules an' cuttin' trail for them danged thieves.

It's allus right when a feller oughta be settin' by the stove soakin' up a li'l heat an' re-cooperatin' a li'l, it's right then one o' them danged emergencies has to come lopin' along an' horn a feller out where it's cold 'nough to freeze the sap in a wooden leg. An' I got a notion it's all 'cause them two wuthless bums start bellerin' 'bout sore-backed hosses, which I reckon they'd be danged glad to git right now.

It's allus jest like that. When a feller starts pawin' 'round tryin' to find a li'l extry trouble, he allus roots out enough to spare a big gob to other folks. An' right now it happens to be me an' Pablo what's the other folks.

It ain't long till me an' li'l Pablo is bustin' snow hip deep to a tall Ute, an' gittin' deeper, an' right away I figger them bronc-snatchers is headed for Hossthief Basin. Which if they gits in there it'll be jest like Ol' Home Week, 'count all them hyenas what lives in there wears the same kinda hide.

Purty soon li'l Pablo lets out a yell what sends a coupla extry shivers stampedin' up an' down my back.

"Look, Johnnee, thee outlaws, they have catch us. May thee Saints preserve—"

Wham!

A sizzlin' .45-70 slug tears a chunk outta the air so danged clost I purty near fall in the hole. Golly! I see right away what's happened. Them skunks has sent a bunch back to cut our trail. They lets us go by till we gits out in the open, after which they figgers to pick us off all same's a coupla turkeys on a limb.

Jest the same, there ain't no bunch o' broomtail snatchers kin stampede me, Johnny Hooker. I yanks my ol' .30-30 from under my leg an' lets 'em have it. *Whang!*

An' right away the boss rustler's hat rises up an' goes sailin' off. Which is jest the way us Hookers sling lead. We allus gits the range fu'st, after which we starts ventilatin' proper.

I'm jest drawin' down to start massycreein' when all them cowardly bums makes a dive for the jackpines, from which they perceeds to return the complyments.

Seethin' sidewinders! Lead's fallin' thicker'n hail at a Fourth o' July picnic, an' jest about as welcome, far as me an' li'l Pablo is concerned. We've jest 'bout decided to go look up a li'l better place to shoot from, 'count o' they ain't no big trees 'round clost, when one o' them slugs nips the tip o' my ol' mule's ear. After which they ain't no more doubt 'bout us leavin' there pronto.

We heads off up the trail plowin' a swath in the snow big enough to drive a chuckwagon through. An' me, I ain't holdin' that mule back none, either. He's got my consent, moral support an' both cow-hooks rowelin' up an' down his ribs.

Zing!

A CHUNK o' lead takes a sample out o' my hat brim, an' I takes a sample outa that ol' mule's ribs with my spurs.

Cripes! I reckon mebbe if I'd a' knowed them fellers wanted to trade for them ol' crowbaits o' our'n that bad, I'd jest a' let 'em have 'em. The way I got it figgered, it's safer to swap hosses, even for a coupla sway-backed mules, 'n it is to swap lead.

Jest the same, us Hookers is mean folks to git funny with. Jest as soon as me an' Pablo kin find a place where the trees is a li'l bigger an' a li'l thicker, it's right then we starts a two-man massycree. Trouble is, time we finds some trees what's big 'nough to pertect a feller, it's so danged dark we can't see our sights.

"Sangre de Dios!" wails Pablo, slowin' up. "We have thee trail lose."

"Yuh're danged right," I yelps. "Which is better'n losin' our hides."

Which is jest like some folks. They ain't never satisfied. The way I got it figgered, they's plenty o' doggoned trails, but they ain't but one hide what'll do me any good.

"But, Johnnee," yelps that li'l coot, "the rustlers, they have the trail foller."

"Which is jest why we ain't follerin' it right now," I says, sour. "All the time we was follerin' that danged trail we was gittin' followed. Trouble was, we was gittin' followed faster'n we was follerin', which ain't healthy."

"An' the Hooker cayuses, Johnnee," he yips, "eet ees of them we should the pree-sent make, yes?"

"Not by a danged sight," I says, important. "This is jest one o' them stray-getic ree-treats. 'Sides which, that danged trail is headed straight for Hossthief Basin—an' trouble. Me, I knows a shortcut, what ain't so crowded."

Sayin' which I eases that ol' sway-backed mule out through the snow, while all the time li'l Pablo, he's yowlin' somethin' 'bout the saints perservin' 'im, an' cold feet.

Golly! I reckon if they's a colder place 'n the rim o' Hossthief Basin, it ain't been found. The way I got it figgered, it'd be a good place for the guv'ment to set up a trainin' school for them danged fool explorer fellers what's allus tryin' to climb the North Pole. I wouldn't be a danged bit supprised if ol' Doc Cook wintered in Hossthief Basin time he thought he'd found the North Pole.

Which ain't sayin' that me, Johnny Hooker, ain't gittin' them hosses back, if I has to float 'crost hell on a cake o' ice.

Purty soon I locates a li'l gap an' we starts slidin' down among the rimrocks. It ain't long till we're edgin' along the bottom rim, when all a sudden li'l Pablo lets out a yip.

"Por Dios! Johnny, a campfire."

I squints quick over the rim, an' danged if the li'l chili-bean ain't right. There's a big campfire right at the foot of the rim, which I figger is them cussed hoss thieves. I reckon mebbe they figger they're safe, bein' over in the Basin, but they ain't never been interduced to the Hookers yet. An' after they gits ac-

quainted, I got a notion they'll stampede every time they sees a hoss with the Hooker iron on it.

Me, I'm sizin' up the outfit an' plannin' a li'l strategy when Pablo, he gits wringy again.

"Maybee now we should warm our —what you say—hoofs by thees campfire, Johnnee, no?"

"Shore thing," I says, sarcastic. "Them fellers down there'd be plumb tickled to warm yuh, from the hocks up."

"But may the saints witness," he wails. "I am steef, like thee so cold well-digger's back. I—"

"Shut up," I growls, low, "while I figgers out a scheme to corral them jaspers an' git our hosses back."

Which is the way it allus is with me, Johnny Hooker, figgerin' things out fu'st, 'stead o' last, which is jest why I goes right on ramrodin' the Hooker spread an' retains my hide an' hair. I reckon mebbe this'll be the fu'st time them danged hoss rustlers tangled horns with somebody what uses their heads for somethin' else 'sides a place to hang their ears.

The way it looks, we gotta git down clost fu'st, so's we kin kinda size up the lay o' the land, as the feller says. Which seems to be all standin' up on end, 'stead o' layin' down. Thinkin' which, we eases down till we're right on the edge of a rimrock jest above the camp.

CRIPES! It looks like a danged convention o' hoss thieves. Must be ten-fifteen o' the skunks, not countin' them what double back to take potshots at me an' Pablo, an' every danged one's loaded down with hardware. I see right away the best strategy is to locate where they keeps their hosses, cut our'n out an' hightail it back to the ranch, an' pos'pone a interduction till later.

"It's jest like this," I says to Pablo, low, "Them fellers down there ain't expectin' no company tonight, an' mebbe it's jest as well if we don't introod. We'll jest sneak around to the remuda, git our hosses and hightail it back to the ranch. Them danged skunks'll be surprised in the mornin' when—"

Which they was, an' 'fore mornin'.

'Count about that time my danged ol' mule lets out a bawl louder'n a circus calliope. Me, I whams both spurs in his neck, an' right then she happens.

The danged fool critter jumps 'bout six feet straight up an' kicks past both ears with his hind feet, after which he sets right back down on his tail. It's right then we loses all holts an' start skiddin' down the mountain, headed straight for that cussed rustler camp.

Holy Pedro! All that pawin' 'round has started a young snowslide, which they ain't nuthin' harder to ride what ain't got hair. An' me, I'm ridin' it bareback 'cept for that danged mule, which I'd be better off if I didn't have that critter for company. Way it is, I'm jest on top half the time; other half the danged critter is ridin' me.

'Bout halfway down we bumps up ag'in a ol' dry tree, which busts in two right in the middle, loosenin' a lot o' boulders an' stuff which all join the peerade. It's a danged good thing I'm bringin' up the drags, 'count o' purty soon we comes shootin' off a rimrock 'bout ten feet high an' land danged near right in the middle o' that rustler camp.

Cripes! I paws out from under 'bout ten feet o' snow an' stands up —an' I'm lookin' the boss hoss thief right in the eye.

"Wal, look-ee here, boys, what's dropped in on us fer a li'l visit," he warbles, actin' perlite, but pawin' for his shootin' irons.

"An' danged if it ain't one o' them fightin' Hookers, too," bawls 'nother. "Haw! Haw! Better watch out, boss, he'll gut-shoot yuh."

"'Commodatin' cuss, too, fellers. He's brought ol' Betsy back," yapps 'nother one.

"Yuh're gol-danged right," I hollers. "An' I'm tradin' 'er for them Hooker hosses, pronto."

"Wal, blast my hide," orates the boss, "lissen tuh the ol' rooster crow. Even at that we'd git the best o' the trade, eh, boys?"

At which all them danged varmints

rears back an' 'bout busts theirselfs laughin'.

Which ain't so good. I allus notice folks don't laugh less'n they got a cinch on the other feller, an' the way it looks now, it's me, Johnny Hooker, what's the other feller. Us Hookers, we're brave men, likewise we got good judgment, which we uses on occasion, an' this looks like one o' them occasions. I see right away it ain't no use to depend on that wu'thless li'l Pablo to help out. I'm bettin' he's halfway back to the ranch 'fore now, leavin' me standin' up an' lookin' one o' them danged emergencies right in the eye.

Which jest goes to show how a feller's troubles'll grow up quick, if he jest peerades 'em 'round an' gives 'em a li'l exercise. Hadn't a' been for them no-'count bums, Stevie an' One-Ton, bellerin' about a coupla ol' sore-backed hosses, this danged emergency wouldn't have me horned up in a corner.

WHILE all this is lopin' 'round in my head, them hoss thieves is bunched up whisperin' an' keepin' a eye on me. Which they better, 'count I'm jest gittin' ready to jump back-'ards 'bout fourteen feet an' pull my shootin' iron, when the boss, he comes spraddlin' over.

"We-el, Hooker," he says, important, "me an' the boys has decided yuh dropped in jest at the right time. We're needin' a feller 'bout like you tuh—"

"Nuthin' doin'!" I bawls. "I'm a honest man. I ain't no danged—"

'Bout then all them cowardly polecats pull their shootin' irons with the bizness ends pointin' right at my gizzard, an' it's right then I decides mebbe it's a good time to use some more judgment.

"It's jest this away," orates the boss. "We're expectin' a li'l visit from the sheriff, an' we figger it's a good time to prove how honest an' law-abidin' us Basin fellers are. It jest plumb makes us grieve to think other folks doubts our honesty. Ain't that right, fellers?" he says, turnin' to them other hyenas.

"Shore is, boss. Haw! Haw!" all them danged varmints howls. "It's a shame the way we gits misjedged."

Cripes! I'm beginnin' to think they're all nuttier 'n a tree full o' Kaibab squirrels.

"Yessir-ee, it's a danged shame," he goes on. "We're jest a bunch o' pore travelin' hoss traders. Sometimes we gits cheated. Like the time we trades a coupla good pack mules for a bunch o' ol' sore-backed hosses."

"It's a danged lie!" I whoops. "Them gol-danged mules is older'n the Grand Canyon, an'—"

"An' any time," the boss crook goes right on, payin' me no 'tenshun, "a feller kin skin us like that, 'specially in the dark, an' us doin' all the tradin', it's right then I figger he oughta give us 'nother chanct. An' ain't that right, fellers?"

"Yuh bet! Hooray! Pour it on 'im, boss," they all yelps.

"So it's jest like this, Hooker. We got a bunch o' good, young stock here which it ain't healthy fer us tuh own, right now. Now we figgers tuh give yuh a bill o' sale all signed up right an' proper, which'll put us in the clear with Sheriff Andy Causey when he shows up. An' we throws in them ol' pie-back broncs tuh boot."

"No, by cripes!" I yelps. "I'll see yuh in hell fu'ther'n a goose kin fly in a week, fu'st. I'm a honest—"

But right away them kiotes, they piles on me all same's a bunch o' four-winged bugs, an' one o' the danged skunks loops a rope 'round my neck an' gives it a jerk.

"Ow! Look out what yuh're doin'," I yells, haulin' off an' plantin' a number ten boot right in his paunch, which sends 'im sailin' back ag'in them others. Which is jest the chance I been lookin' for.

Rearin' up, I takes off down the crick, scratchin' gravel worse'n a quarter hoss on a rodeo track, an' all the time I'm pawin' at that danged rope. But 'fore I kin git it pawed up over my horns them danged varmints grabs aholt an' gives a jerk which turns me a back flipflop. I lands straddle o' the danged rope with my head pulled down 'tween my legs, after which I ain't got no

chanct. 'Fore I kin git straightened out, them blasted hyenas has throwed the rope over a cottonwood limb an' give it a jerk.

"Hell-up—erk!" I gurgles, reachin' up an' grabbin' the rope. "Lemme down from here, yuh danged yaller—"

"How 'bout it, Hooker?" says the boss. "Ain't we jest sold yuh some hosses, fer which yuh has a bill o' sale all right an' proper?"

"In a pig's— Ouch!" I yells. "Quit jerkin' on that cussed rope. How kin a feller talk bizness when he's all choked up. Lemme think."

Which I perceeds to do, quick. The way I got it figgered, if I don't sign that cussed paper, some danged coroner'll be signin' another paper which'll say—"By parties unknown," after which that no-'count li'l brother Stevie'll make a dood ranch outa the Hooker spread. An' if I signs it, Sheriff Andy Causey'll be suspicious, which he mostly is sincet 'lection, anyhow, an' think I'm the biggest hoss thief in the country.

Looks like the gran'daddy of all them di-lemys' with horns on both ends, has got me all corraled. Jest the same, it's jest sech emergencies what gits the ol' Hooker strategy to workin'. Any time they thinks they got a Hooker hog-tied, they better give another jerk on their hoggin' rope.

Onct I gits that bill o' sale, they ain't no law which says I gotta keep it. By Godfrey, I'll chaw it up an' swaller it 'fore I'll let ol' Andy Causey ketch me with it. Thinkin' which, I gits diplo-matic.

"Bring on yore danged bill o' sale," I gurgled, all bizness. "When us Hookers buys stock, we demands plenty o' paper talk."

THEM hoss thieves looks a li'l suspicious, but jest the same the boss, he writes out a bill o' sale, all signed an' witnessed, which says I done bought ten head o' four-year-old geldings, unbranded, which means, by cripes, they been raidin' one o' these here dood hoss ranches what don't brand their stuff till they sells it.

"Here she be, Hooker," he yaps "Now then, when the sheriff shows up, we're jest a bunch o' pore ranchers, tryin' to make a honest livin' sellin' saddle stock to cow folks. 'Course, after the sheriff leaves we buys 'em back, *cheap*."

"Ha! Ha! Hoo-ray! Danged if the boss ain't a bizness man," bawls all them danged broom-tailers.

"Shore thing, I'm a bizness man," the durn crook gobbles, swellin' up, proud. "An' like all good bizness men, I ain't takin' no chances on Mister Hooker backin' outta the deal. None what-so-ever.

"You, Hank, take yore thirty-thirty an' sneak out there in the willers, jest in case Mister Hooker fergits he bought a bunch o' nice, young saddle stock. If I raises my hat—yuh know what tuh do."

"Hold on there a minute!" I yowls. "What if the danged wind blows yore hat off? Which ain't going to be fair."

"Wee-el, 'course my hat don't fit none too tight," that ol' owl 'lucidates, calm. "Under sech unfortunate cir-cumstances, I reckon we'd jest hafta search the body tuh git the bill o' sale back."

Sufferin' crabs! Looks like I stands to lose comin' an' goin'. Here I had a ace up my sleeve, figgerin' to bawl all them skunks out jest as soon as ol' Andy showed up with his posse, an' right away that ol' hoss thief coppers my bet. Me, I'm jet gittin' ready to do some more heavy thinkin' when that bunch o' wolves hazes me into a li'l cabin what's settin' right up clost. After which the boss starts in givin' orders.

"Jest let 'im keep his gun, fellers. It'll look more natcheral when the sheriff shows up. 'Sides, there ain't no winders an' jest one door in that cabin. He's plumb safe—'specially with Hank settin' out there in the brush with that thirty-thirty."

An' I reckon mebbe he's right. 'Course, I could take a few potshots at them skunks, but if I shows up in the door I'd be sky-lined all same's a turkey on a roost.

One thing I figgers to do if I ever gits outa here an' retains my intes-

tines, an' that's kick the seat o' that cowardly li'l Pablo's pants up so cussed high he'll have to wear chaps with arm-holes in 'em. Runnin' off right when he'd oughta own a stack in the game.

The way it is, I figger I'll wait till Andy shows up, an' it's right then I'll start whammin' lead, pronto an' promiscuous — which, I comes to think, might bring on complications, 'count o' Andy not knowin' who was doin' the shootin', an' me bein' skeered to come out 'count o' Hank settin' out there in the brush with that .30-30. Danged if it don't look like I'm ketched worse'n a kiote in a bear trap.

Jest the same I decides to have a li'l look-see 'round that cabin, thinkin' mebbe I might push a log out. But they ain't no chanct. She's solid as the meat on a corn-fed steer. They ain't nuthin' in there 'sides a li'l ol' 'dobe fireplace, which ain't big 'nough to 'commodate a Scotch Santa Claus.

It's while I'm feelin' 'round in there I hears a li'l racket right clost, an' a piece o' chinkin' eases out an' falls down on the dirt floor. Me, I jumps back quick, thinkin' some o' them hoss thieves is figgerin' to nose a gun through the crack an' pot-shoot me jest on gen'ral principles. I pulls my ol' six-gun an' sneaks back, clost.

"Shh— Johnnee!"

Cripes! It's that danged li'l cowardly Pablo on the outside.

"Shh— yerself," I growls, low, squintin' out where all them hoss thieves is settin' 'round the fire, talkin' big. "I got a notion to—"

"But, Johnnee," he wails, low, "may the saints witness, I—"

"No saint what had good sense'd be 'round here," I hisses, hoarse. "Git yore gun an' we'll clean these danged varmints out."

"*Por Dios!* Johnnee, but I have theenk thee beeg—what you say—scheme. Tonight when the hombres sleep I weel thee beeg stampede make. Eet ees then—"

"What the—" I cuts in, but that li'l chili-bean, he goes right on.

"I, Pablo de la Vamoosco el Pancho Martinez, while thee rope was around the senor's neck, have my riata tied to thee bed of thees boss *caballo* thief."

Cripes-a-mighty! While them skunks is jest about to string me up, the danged li'l coot's been sneakin' 'round on some doggoned monkey bizness. Which jest goes to show what I gotta put up with 'round the Hooker ranch. I got a notion to jab 'im in the eye with the barrel o' my ol' six-gun.

"An', Senor Johnnee, when thees beeg stampede she come, eet ees then you should come the cabin out, queek, an' we weel vamose the flats. *Sacre!*"

"Git tuh hell outa here," I whispers, mad, "an' go git Stevie an' One-Ton. I ain't got no time to play peek-a-boo with a danged—"

"*Adios, amigo* Johnnee—an' do not forget when thees beeg scare she come—"

"Git!" I hisses. "An' I ain't goin' to forgit to cut yore danged hide up fer saddle strings soon's we git back to the ranch." Which I reckon'll be when, an' if, we gits back, with a lot o' guessin' on the "if." Way it looks now, I'll git plugged if I makes a play, an' I'll git sent up for hoss stealin' if I don't.

ABOUT that time they's a racket outside an' Sheriff Andy Causey an' two-three others comes ridin' up.

"H'ist 'em!" he yelps, throwin' his iron on them danged hoss thieves.

"Shore thing, Sheriff," yips the boss, chirp as yuh please. "We're jest honest hoss raisers."

"Hoss lifters, yuh mean," growls Andy, tough.

"No sir-ee," the boss thief argufies. "We got proof. The boss Hooker jest rode in tuh take delivery on a bunch o' young stuff we raised."

"Which ain't no proof," says Andy, sour. "I got a notion they'd take anything what wasn't tied at both ends. An' I reckon they got a habit o' ridin' mules an' takin' potshots at the law, huh? What yuh think o' that?" An' Andy, he yanks his ol' lid off an' pokes his finger in a big hole.

Cripes! I see right away where I done made a mistake, a danged serious mistake, thinkin' Andy and his

posse was them hoss thieves, an' pumpin' lead at 'em. Seem like that danged di-lemy is gittin' me cinched up tighter ev'ry minute. If I gits ketched now, ol' Andy'll wham me with two counts o' the law. Hoss stealin' an' mule stealin', to say nuthin' o' slingin' lead at the law.

It's right then the boss hoss thief plays his trump.

"Hey, you, Hooker," he bawls, "come out here an' 'splain tuh the sheriff how we sells yuh a bunch o' hosses."

But us Hookers, we're hard to corral. Right when one o' these emergencies figger they got us headed for the brandin' chute, it's right then we starts thinkin' quick an' actin' the same way. I makes a dive for that danged fireplace an' starts pawin' an' clawin'.

Cripes! It fits tighter'n li'l Stevie's boot. Phooey! The danged soot all lets go an' comes right down in my face, till I reckon I'm blacker'n ol' George's tomcat. Jest the same I keeps humpin' an' scratchin' till I gits where I wants. Which is the way it allus is with us Hookers. We gits through an' grows our hide back a li'l later.

Purty soon I hears 'em stompin' 'round in the cabin. The boss thief, he's tryin' to argyfy with ol' Andy, but ain't havin' no luck. It ain't long till Andy herds 'em back outside, after which he ties 'em up an' slams 'em down on their beds. It's right then him an' the danged posse come stompin' back in the cabin.

"Ain't no use stayin' out there in the cold, fellers," he says. "We'll jest build a li'l fire in the fireplace an' fix us some chuck."

Gosh-amighty! Looks like they's one Hooker due to git hogtied an' branded by one o' them emergencies, surer'n hell. If I comes down out o' the fireplace, they'll be too much 'splainin' to do to Andy, an' he's plenty tough since election. If I stays in it, I gits turned into smoked meat.

But us Hookers is re-sourceful. When they ain't but one way to go, we goes it. Thinkin' which, I comes shootin' up out that danged chimney all same's a jack-in-the-box, quick, but I ain't as quick as that cussed Hank.

Whang!

A 'dobe brick jumps up an' whams me right in the sniffer. I see right away Hank, he's still on the job, an' me, I'm sky-lined all same's a owl on a limb. Ain't but one thing to do, an' I does it, pronto, floppin' down on the roof quicker'n a rodeo steer with both front feet in the loop.

"What in hell!" bawls Andy, stampedin' outside. "Somethin's danged queer 'round here."

WHICH it is, an' gits more so, 'count about that time they's a helluva racket, and the way I figgers it the whole danged Apache tribe has got drunk an' stampeded off the reservation.

"Yip-a-yeeee! Wow! *Bang!*"

Gran Quivera! The whole danged camp is full o' hosses, headed straight through, an' right behind 'em is li'l Pablo, whuppin' an' spurrin' an' shootin' with both irons. Which ain't all. 'Bout that time the boss thief's bed rises up an' starts sailin' off, spillin' hoss thieves goin' an' comin'.

"Hell's fire! Hellup!" he bawls, turnin' 'bout fourteen flipflops an' whammin' up ag'in Andy. Andy, he skids up ag'in the cabin an' bounces back, peelin' off more hide 'n he lost on 'lection day.

It's right then I sees everything clear. Li'l Pablo, he's sneaked up an' tied his rope to the boss hoss thief's bed. After which he's stampeded their hoss cavvy through the camp an' follered 'em with that bed on the end o' his rope, figgerin' I'll come stampedein' out an' join up, which I perceeds to do.

Makin' a run an' jump off the roof, I lands straddle o' two o' Andy's deputys, whammin' their horns down on the ground so hard they stays there with their heads under 'em. But 'bout that time Andy, he jumps up an' gits a eyeful o' me.

"A danged nigger!" he bawls. "I figgered they was one 'round here in the danged woodpile." After which he cuts loose with both irons.

(Continued on page 128)

Gunless Gamble

Silvers looked across the fire into the cruel eyes of Matt Kelton!

Black Kelton, Terror of the San Saba Hills, Meets a New Kind of Hombre When Johnny Silver Deals Out His Own Brand of Range Justice

By GUNNISON STEELE

Author of "Guns of Chance," "Badman's Bail," etc.

YOUNG JOHNNY SILVERS was a gentle, easy-going sort of gent, till you tromped too hard on his toes. He was tall and lean-hipped and tough as whang-leather, with reddish hair and dreamy blue eyes.

Young Johnny Silvers would occasionally take a drink of whiskey, and play a little cheap poker. He was a terror with his fists and handy with a six-gun.

But Johnny Silvers didn't like fighting and hell-raisin'. He liked horses. He liked to feel the wind and sun against his face as he rode across the plain. And he liked to sit on the Wineglass corral gate at

sunset and watch the color drain slowly from the sky.

Old Joe Guyes had taught him to love these things, had taught him ever since he was a kid that fighting and raisin' hell was plain damn foolishness. Somehow, Johnny Silvers thought that Sheriff Joe Guyes—who more than thirty years ago had brought six-gun law to the roaring trail town of Coldwater, and had kept it there ever since—ought to know.

But now Joe Guyes was getting old, and for a couple of years now had been plagued by rheumatism. He meant to retire at the end of his present term and loaf about his Wineglass outfit, which Johnny Silvers was rodding for him now, and let the sun bake the rheumatics out of his joints.

JOHNNY SILVERS, driving two bays hooked to a buckboard, was thinking of the plans he and Uncle Joe had made as he neared Coldwater. Only a few hours ago he had got word that old Joe's rheumatism was bothering him again; that the old lawman was so helpless that he had been forced to remain behind while a hastily gathered posse trailed south to the little town of San Saba where, word had come, the town's one bank had been gutted by a gang of masked looters.

No bank had been looted in San Saba—but nobody in Coldwater knew that yet. Johnny Silvers, as he drove into the upper end of the street, didn't know that he was barging straight into trouble and grief. His first suspicion that something was wrong came when his eye caught a quick flurry of movement a hundred yards along the street.

A couple of burly, dust-coated, black-bearded gents with bulging gunny-sacks clutched in their hands, had darted from a big frame building and into an alley alongside the structure. They reappeared almost instantly, astride plunging mounts. Fierce, defiant yells boiled from their bearded lips as they tore along the street. Thunder rolled from their red-jetting guns. Geysers of dust fogged upward from under churning hoofs.

Bank-looters!

The street had been deserted, except for the two bandits and several yelping curs. But suddenly Johnny Silvers saw a bent, raw-boned figure lunge from a doorway. The twisted, grey-bearded oldster hobbled into the street, straight into the path of the plunging, yelling riders. The long-barreled old Colt in his gnarled fingers snaked up, and its muzzle spouted flame.

A star glinted in the sunshine. Silvers knew that old Joe Guyes, his wiry body knotted and tortured by rheumatism, had hobbled out to do lone-handed battle with the bank-raiders!

He saw the two black-bearded gents turn toward the oldster. He saw triumph and savage hate blare in their black eyes as their guns blazed leaden death. Old Joe Guyes staggered, swaying like a gnarled oak in a strong breeze, then braced himself on stiff legs and raised his gun again, a fighting lawman to the last.

Quick, killing rage lashed at Johnny Silvers. He grabbed his gun from its holster and reared up in the buckboard, at the same time realizing bitterly that he was too late to help old Joe. For outlaw bullets had chopped the grizzled oldster down into the dusty street. Joe Guyes lay motionless, smoking gun still clutched in out-stretched hand, as the two fierce-eyed killers rode with mocking yells out of town and far across the plain.

The gunfire had frightened the bays, and their wild lunges had ruined Johnny Silvers' aim. But now the red-haired youth leaped from the buckboard and ran to Joe Guyes' side. Anxiously, he raised the old lawman's grizzled head. Crimson stained the sheriff's breast, cascaded over his seamed face. Joe Guyes was alive, but when he opened his pain-steeped eyes Johnny could plainly see the grim shadow of death in them. Johnny Silvers had to bend low to catch the dying man's words.

"They—tricked me—Johnny. They wanted everybody outa town—so that

they could gut the bank. Tricked me, them Keltons did!"

"Don't let that worry you, oldtimer," Johnny Silvers said huskily. "I'll get the damned skunks; I'll make 'em pay. Here, let me help yuh back to the office."

Joe Guyes stopped him with a weak gesture. "Ain't no use, Johnny, had to go sometime, I reckon. Them was the Kelton boys, Jube and Matt —and I let 'em trick me. They hated me, allus said they'd get me—"

Fierce curses welled in Johnny Silvers' young throat. "They'll pay, Uncle Joe. I'll put lead into both their insides!"

Joe Guyes shook his head weakly. "All the boys are outa town, and it'll be several hours 'fore a posse c'n get started on their trail."

"I'm not waitin' for a posse. I don't need law for them kind of skunks!"

A queer, soft light came into the old lawman's pain-haunted eyes. "I brought law to Coldwater, Johnny, I've kept it here. But this here star I wear has allus kept me from killin' a gent when I didn't have to. The law's still best, let the law 'tend to them Keltons."

Johnny Silvers' blue eyes were no longer gentle and dreamy. At this moment they went to the inky clouds that were boiling along the western horizon.

"It'll maybe storm, and wipe out their trail, before that posse gets back. No, Uncle Joe, I'm ridin' alone —now!"

IN the short silence that followed, Johnny Silvers heard only Joe Guyes' harsh breathing. His young face had turned to a bitter mask of hate for the killers who had shot down the old sheriff who was no kin to him, but who had been more than a father.

"Yeah, I guess yuh'll go," Joe Guyes whispered. "But yuh know I allus hated killers, Johnny. I don't want yuh to be a killer, like them Keltons. Here—"

Fumblingly, the oldster took the sheriff's star from his ragged vest. With the last of his strength he raised himself on an elbow and pinned the badge over Johnny Silvers' heart. Pride shone in his fading eyes.

"I'm deputizin' you, Johnny!"

Blood frothed to Joe Guyes' lips. His life's blood bubbled away at the corners of his mouth.

Johnny Silvers lifted hard eyes, conscious for the first time of the circle of faces surrounding him. Stooped oldsters, with a few women and dirty-faced kids, who had crowded curiously into the now quiet street.

"Take care of Uncle Joe," Johnny told them, and added: "I'll be needin' a hoss, and some grub and water."

Twenty minutes later, mounted on a gaunt blue roan, Johnny Silvers rode out of Coldwater. His brain was a turmoil of twisted thoughts as he followed the trail of the two killers toward the purple line of hills bristling along the horizon. Uncle Joe Guyes dead! Uncle Joe would never again sit with him on the corral gate and watch the red sun sink into its nest of hills, nor watch the blazing sky darken into night.

Johnny Silvers remembered the story of how Joe Guyes, almost twenty years ago, and at a time when the dreaded red scourge—small-pox —was sweeping the range, had one wintry day come upon a nester's poor cabin which gave out no smoke from the chimney. Inside the cabin the sheriff had found a man and a woman, dead, and a lustily-bawling baby boy less than a year old. Joe Guyes had buried the victims of the red scourge, and carried the baby home with him.

Looking backward, Johnny Silvers knew that never between an own father and son had there been a deeper loyalty and understanding, than the bond that had been forged through the years between old Joe Guyes and himself.

He followed swiftly the trail across the plain. He knew fully the peril of trailing the two burly gents who had killed the old sheriff. He knew they were the Kelton brothers, Matt and Jube, last of the Kelton

clan who for years had been behind much of the lawlessness on the Coldwater range.

The Black Keltons, they had come to be called, and the blood feud between Sheriff Joe Guyes and the lawless Keltons had been fierce. Of the four brothers, Joe Guyes had sent two of them to the pen a year ago, and Matt and Jube had sworn to get the square old lawman.

TODAY, that long-smoldering hate had boiled over, and Joe Guyes lay dead in Coldwater's dusty street.

Thoughts of Uncle Joe, lying back there in the hot street, drove Johnny Silvers on. An eye for an eye. Then the blazing sun glinted on the badge pinned to his shirt, and he remembered old Joe's last words:

"I allus hated killers, Johnny—I don't want you to be a killer!"

But that little piece of tin, Johnny Silvers vowed fiercely, wouldn't keep him from blasting those murdering Keltons to hell, if he came up with them.

Then the ugly black clouds that had lain all day back over the hills, started rising swiftly, and in twenty minutes it was raining. Swirling curtains of water, driven by a sudden wind, beat down upon the parched plains and quickly wiped out the trail that Johnny Silvers had been following. But, bitter-eyed at the sudden turn of events, Johnny hunched his red head lower in his slicker and pushed on steadily toward the hills. For among those rough, pine-clogged ridges, he knew, the Keltons would seek refuge.

The rain poured down for half an hour, then stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The sun came out, gleaming upon a soaked earth that was crisscrossed with gullies that were banked high with muddy water.

Then Johnny Silvers heard a hollow, moaning sound on the plain ahead, and a few minutes later came to a swirling, boiling torrent of yellow water that stretched a hundred feet from bank to bank. The Big Sandy, dry most of the year, but now a roaring, seething monster.

The Keltons, Johnny guessed, had crossed on the dry creek bed. But now it would be hours before the raging water subsided. It took Johnny five minutes to fight the big, mean-eyed roan into the water, then they lunged in all at once.

Yellow, nasty water closed over man and horse. The roan came up, pawing and squealing as the twisting current caught them and whirled them toward the middle of the raging stream.

Johnny Silvers gave the roan its head. The current was more savage even than he'd thought. A maelstrom of yellow water writhed like a monstrous snake about him, tugging and beating at him with eager, clammy hands.

Then, suddenly, they were on the other side, and Johnny Silvers rode grim-faced on toward the hills. But he hadn't gone far when a queer feeling came over him. His hand slid quickly to his gun-holster and found it empty!

Johnny Silvers paused. He knew that the water in the raging Big Sandy had pulled the gun from its holster, that it was gone for good. He knew he would be a damn fool to ride on into the hills after a couple of ruthless killers like the Keltons, without a gun. Then Johnny Silvers looked down and saw the shiny star on his vest, and he knew that it'd take more than the loss of a gun to keep him from getting the killers of old Joe Guyes.

He rode on.

By sunset he had gained the hills, a confused world of deep ravines, rock walls and pin-studded ridges. With the coming of darkness, he stopped. Somewhere in these hills, probably not far off, were Matt and Jube Kelton. But to search for them now would be foolish. And, if he found them, he would be next to helpless, unarmed as he was.

So Johnny Silvers did what seemed a very foolish thing. Atop a bare ridge, where its leaping flames might be seen for miles around, he kindled a campfire, and seated himself in the crimson circle of light.

Two hours later, Johnny Silvers looked across the campfire into the

black, cruel little eyes of Matt Kelton and saw—death! The campfire, as he'd intended, had brought the big killer. Jube Kelton, Johnny guessed, was skulking out there in the brush, fearing a trap.

"You're makin' a mistake, Matt," Johnny Silvers said softly. "You'd better kill me now."

"No hurry," the black-bearded giant grinned. "I been afoot, since my hoss stepped in a hole a few miles back and broke its leg. Besides, I got two good reasons for not killin' yuh 'fore daylight. Guns make noise—and a posse might be prowlin' about not far off."

"And the other reason?" interrupted Johnny Silvers.

"Dead men draw buzzards. I know where there's a brush drift a coupla miles up the creek. And I don't aim to pack yore body there, yuh've got to walk."

Johnny Silvers fingered the sheriff's star on his vest, so that the firelight glinted brightly on it.

"You see this star, Matt? Tin, but it means somethin.' It means a hangnoose for murderin' skunks like you. I got a hunch it's you that's gonna die, with a rope around your neck."

"Hunches and shiny stars don't mean nothin'," Matt Kelton growled. "A badge didn't do ol' Joe Guyes no good, when I put a bullet in his stomach, did it?"

Johnny Silvers said nothing for a while. Fresh, savage hate and anger flared in his heart. Matt Kelton didn't know that the murdered lawman had been more than a father to him. He also did not know that a fierce desire for personal vengeance not law vengeance, had sent him into the hills.

HE looked at his trussed ankles and wrists, and figured the odds against him. But not for an instant had he regretted his gamble in placing himself deliberately in his enemy's power.

The fire had been made in a little clearing fifty feet across. The clearing was hemmed by towering rock walls on two sides, by a cedar thicket on the third. On the fourth side was the crumbly rim of a cliff that dropped away abruptly into the darkness. Johnny Silvers could hear the cool tinkle of a stream on the canyon bed many feet below.

Johnny looked about the clearing, and said: "You can call Jube in now, it's safe enough."

Matt Kelton cursed harshly. "Jube is dead! That's one more I owe you skunky lawmen. One of ol' Joe Guyes' slugs got Jube in the neck, back there in Coldwater. He managed to stay in the saddle till we got into the hills, then he died. I buried Jube an hour before I saw yore fire."

Matt Kelton broke off, to direct a bitter tirade of curses. It was directed against all lawmen in general.

"Two for one, that's a fair trade. I killed ol' Joe Guyes—and you'll die at sunup!"

"You'll hang," Johnny Silvers said calmly.

"Stop talkin' about hangin'" the killer said furiously. "I'm all wore out and I'm goin' to sleep now. Don't try no tricks, or I'll make yuh beg for death."

Matt Kelton rolled himself in a blanket beside the fire and soon snored harshly.

Johnny Silvers lay back against his own saddle and blanket on the ground. He could hear the mean-eyed blue roan grazing on the hillside. Evidently Matt Kelton had cached his own saddle and pack, after his horse had stepped in a hole and broken its leg.

Desperately, Johnny Silvers racked his brain. But it seemed that he had overplayed his hand. He had already ascertained that it was useless to try to escape his bonds. He could only lay bitter-eyed and helpless through the long hours of night, chilled by a bleak wind that snaked through the hills.

At dawn he was sore and stiff and miserable. Matt Kelton rummaged in Johnny's pack, brought out a skillet and all that remained of the food. Wolfishly he gulped the half-cooked meal, while Johnny watched.

"I'd hate to die hungry," Johnny said plaintively.

"I'll give yuh some grub," the big killer grinned, "jest to show I'm kind-hearted. I'll untie yore hands, so you c'n eat. But don't try no fancy tricks, or—"

Johnny Silvers ate slowly as he leaned back against the saddle. Matt Kelton watched suspiciously, gun in hand. He didn't guess that Johnny

Silvers hadn't been hungry, that he'd wanted his hands free for a very definite purpose.

The food gone, Kelton retied Johnny's hands behind him. He went out into the hillside and returned with the mean-eyed roan.

"We're headin' up the creek for that drift now," he grinned, as he slapped on saddle and blanket.

JOHNNY SILVERS' face was tight and haggard in the light of dawn. "That roan's powerful ornery," he said. "He might not want to pack double."

"Hell, I don't aim for him to! I'm gonna untie yore feet, so yuh c'n walk. But I'll have a gun squar' in yore back!

"Start walkin', hombre!" he said as he untied the red-haired youth's ankles.

Johnny stepped out in front of the saddled roan. Matt Kelton slid his foot into the stirrup, swung into the saddle. Johnny, looking back over his shoulder, saw a shiver run through the roan's powerful body. The last of the Black Keltons leaned back comfortably in the saddle. "Star-toter," Matt Kelton began, "yuh'll soon be—"

His words chopped off harshly. The roan grunted, humped its back, its mean eyes flaring wide with pain and rage as it went straight into the air. It came down on stiff legs, then exploded again in a cyclonic burst of furious bucking. Johnny Silvers, grim triumph in his blue eyes, backed into a niche in the wall and watched.

Matt Kelton, stark amazement stamped on his hairy face, grabbed for the saddle-horn and clung desperately as the maddened roan plunged in vicious circles around the little clearing. Seemingly, the animal had gone crazy, lost all sense of direction as it tore about the clearing, scattering the fire, crashing into the walls, bucking savagely on the very rim of the canyon.

The big killer, face gone pasty with terror, dropped his gun and concentrated on trying to stay in the saddle. Still the mean-eyed roan slashed the ground stiff-legged, spinning round and round in a senseless fury.

Suddenly the roan stumbled, slithered toward the canyon rim. Loose rocks grated under threshing hoofs, as a portion of the crumbly wall gave way. Matt Kelton screamed harshly.

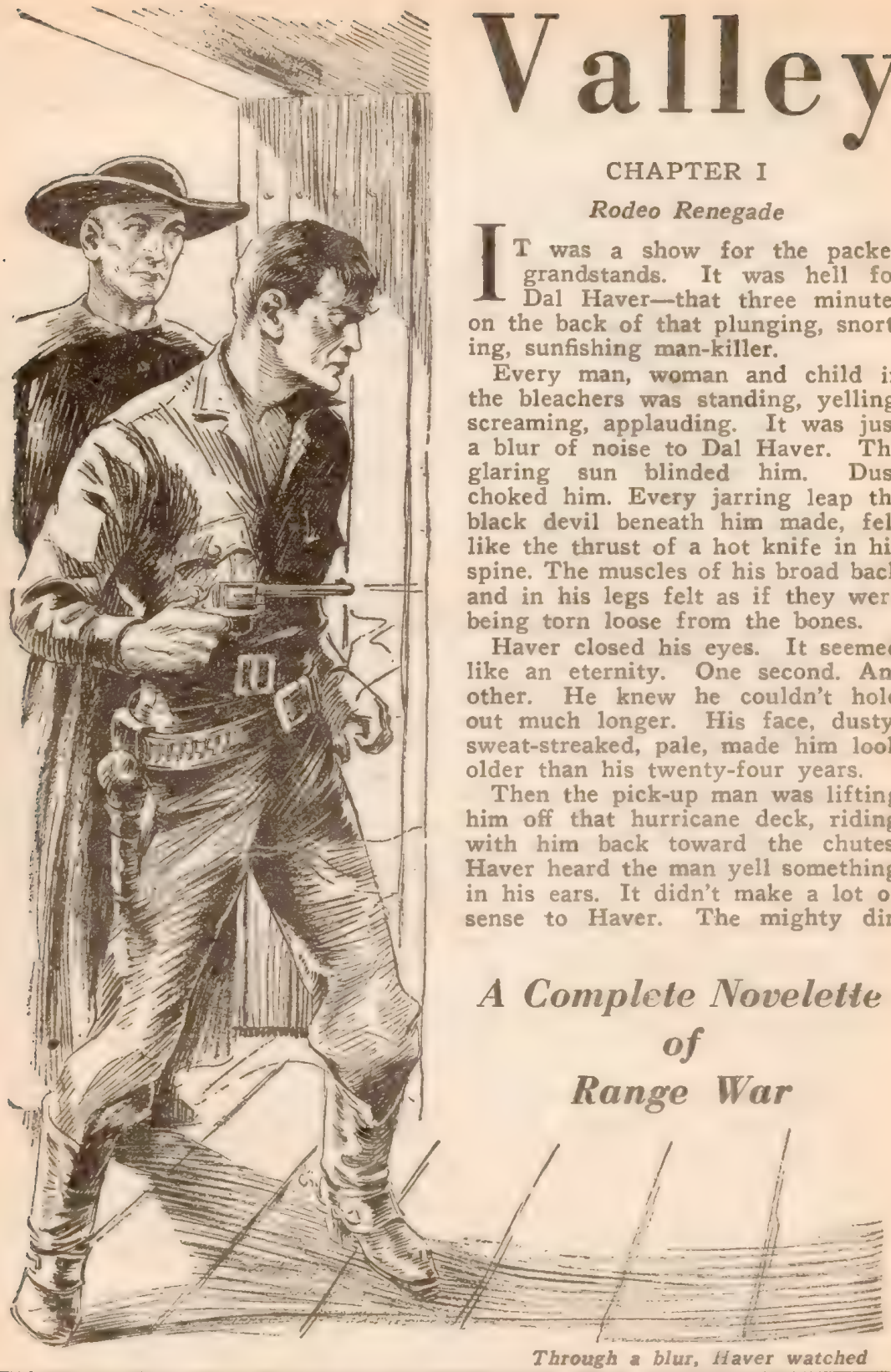
Johnny Silvers listened to the roar of loosened rock down the broken wall. With a brand from the fire he burned the ropes from his wrists. Then he clambered down the wall, to the canyon bed a hundred feet below.

Matt Kelton, stunned and bruised, but alive, lay in the edge of the shallow stream beside the dead roan. Savage hate shone in his inky eyes as Johnny stood over him with a gun in his hand.

"What'd yuh do to that hawse?" he snarled weakly.

For answer, Johnny removed the saddle and blanket from the dead roan. And from the under side of the blanket he took something that resembled a piece of tin that had been bent and twisted so that the sharp prongs, when fastened to the blanket, would gouge into the horse's back.

"A little piece of tin, Mister," Johnny Silvers said grimly, as he straightened the sheriff's star and pinned it carefully back on his vest. "But this is one time it did some good. It'll fit a hang-noose for your neck!"



Through a blur, Haver watched

Valley

CHAPTER I

Rodeo Renegade

IT was a show for the packed grandstands. It was hell for Dal Haver—that three minutes on the back of that plunging, snorting, sunfishing man-killer.

Every man, woman and child in the bleachers was standing, yelling, screaming, applauding. It was just a blur of noise to Dal Haver. The glaring sun blinded him. Dust choked him. Every jarring leap the black devil beneath him made, felt like the thrust of a hot knife in his spine. The muscles of his broad back and in his legs felt as if they were being torn loose from the bones.

Haver closed his eyes. It seemed like an eternity. One second. Another. He knew he couldn't hold out much longer. His face, dusty, sweat-streaked, pale, made him look older than his twenty-four years.

Then the pick-up man was lifting him off that hurricane deck, riding with him back toward the chutes. Haver heard the man yell something in his ears. It didn't make a lot of sense to Haver. The mighty din

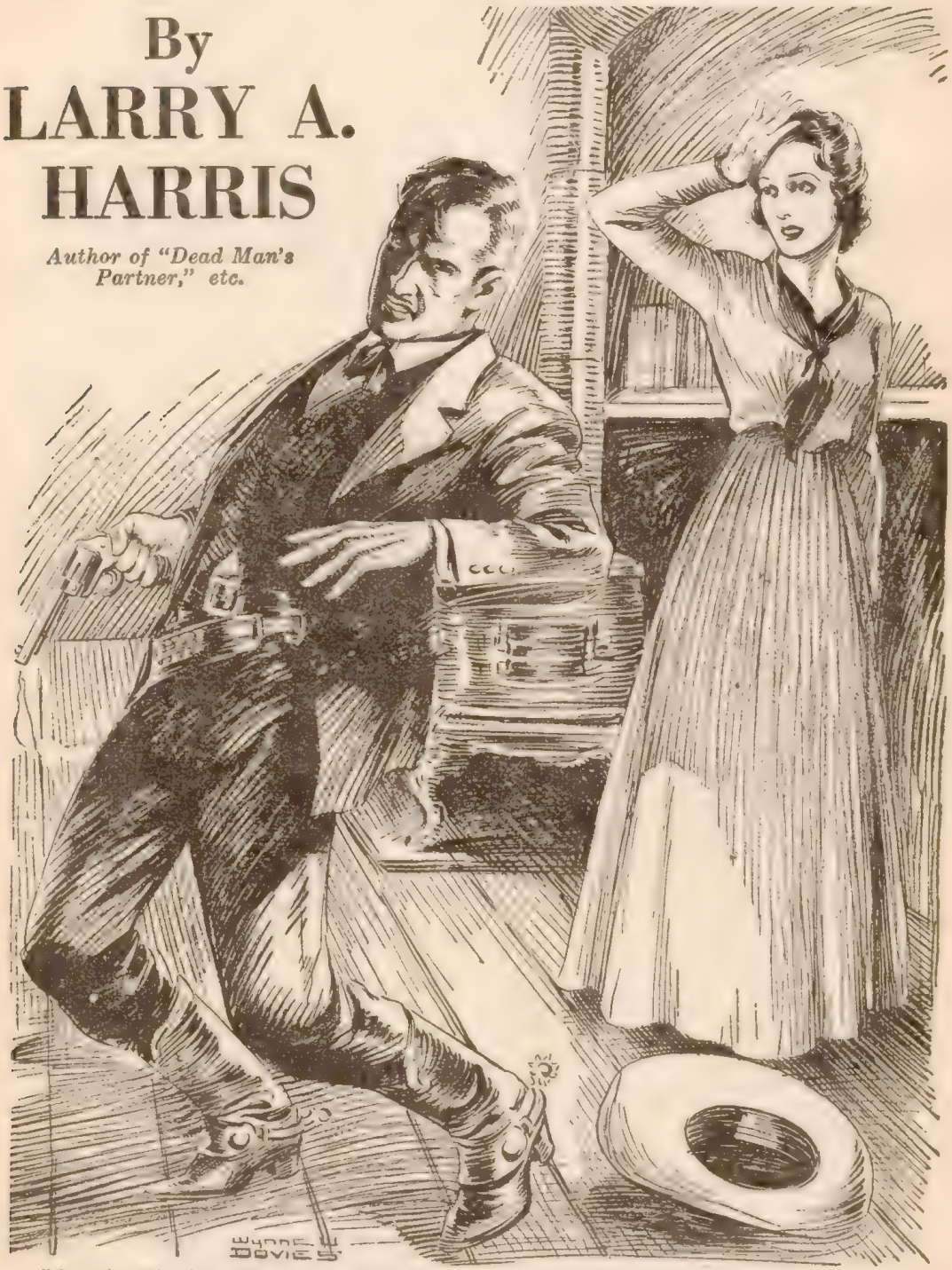
A Complete Novelette of Range War

Bullets Pop Out a Gunman's Requiem as

of Blazing Guns

By
LARRY A. HARRIS

Author of "Dead Man's Partner," etc.



Big Dice Kegley totter, then fall

Hondo Greets Dal Haver, Texan Salty

from the grandstands beat into his ears.

When the pick-up man dropped him to the ground at the chutes, Haver leaned for a moment against the whitewashed fence. His legs felt wobbly. Things swirled giddily before his eyes. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand. It made a crimson stain across his lips. He grinned weakly as some of the cowboys hurried up to him.

"Finest ride I ever seen, Dal," said an old bulldogger grimly. "You earned first money. Better go back to the shed an' git a drink. Look like you need it."

"Guess I was purty lucky," Haver drawled.

He left the group of men, strode past the corrals to the sheds. His head cleared a little. The awful ache in the pit of his stomach was lessening. In the bunkhouse he threw his few belongings into a blanket-roll. Then he saddled his palamino horse.

He had just finished tying the roll behind the cantle of his saddle when the promoter came up. He was a big man with heavy jowls and eyes too close set to be honest. He grinned at Haver, waved a fat arm back toward the grandstands.

"Hear 'em, Dal!" he boomed. "It's the next event but they're still yelling their heads off about that ride yuh made."

"Shore, I hear 'em," said Haver indifferently.

The promoter said he thought it was swell that a young gent like Dal Haver could win such applause. He chuckled and patted Haver's shoulder. Then he handed Haver a small envelope.

"Here's your money, son. First dough. This is a lot of money for a young gent."

"That's all I'm thinkin' of," said Haver quietly. "Jest the money."

The promoter's eyes squinted in his fat face. He looked at the saddled palamino. The affable grin fell from his lips.

"Goin' into town, Haver?"

"Yeah, I'm leavin' the show now, Mister Abbott."

Promoter Abbott frowned. "We'd counted on yuh goin' with us to Alpine, kid," he growled. "Yuh're just becomin' a pullin' card now."

"I'm sorry, Mister Abbott," said Haver. "I'm quittin'. See, I got a pard up Hondo way in New Mexico. Him an' me's doin' a little homesteadin' up there. I'm goin' up an' join him."

"Quittin'," sneered Abbott.

Dal Haver stood the sting of his one word without losing his smile.

"That's right," he said softly. "I'm quittin'. I didn't sign on with yore show for any specified length of time. Any objections?"

ABBOTT'S face reddened. "What is the matter, kid—you yella?"

Haver's tall frame stiffened. A flame crept into his blue eyes.

"What's yore guess, Abbott?" he asked gently.

Abbott was a fair judge of human nature. He seemed to read something in Haver's eyes. Something that told him he'd better just let the matter drop. He tried to grin. It was a sickly effort.

"My guess is that you ain't, Haver," he chirped.

"That's nice of you to say that, Abbott."

Haver had never liked this fat-bellied, blustering promoter. It was a dislike which had grown during the two months Dal Haver had been with Abbott's Rodeo Carnival. He quickly tore open an end of the envelope, took out some folded bills. He counted them. There was three hundred dollars. Haver called to Abbott just as the promoter started back toward the arena.

"Jest a minute, Abbott. There's only three hundred here accordin' to my tally. First money in the bronc ridin' called for four hundred."

Promoter Abbott turned, annoyed. "That's all I ever agreed to pay for that event," he snapped. Yuh got yore money. Now get!"

Haver didn't get. Beneath the tan his face paled. He took an easy step nearer the big man. He was almost as tall as Abbott, but differently built. Where Abbott had beef

Haver had slabs of steel-like muscle. One hundred and seventy pounds of it on his tall, broad-shouldered frame.

"I've still got a hundred comin', Abbott," he said very softly.

Abbott tried to bluster. He started off. Haver called to him again. The fat promoter turned back, face dark with rage. Then Haver swung. His fist didn't travel far. But it caught the man's thick jowl, jarred a terrific grunt out of him and sprawled him in the dust.

Boiling with anger, Haver sprang forward, stooped over the bellowing, swearing promoter. From the big gent's pocket, Haver removed a thick billfold. He took a hundred dollar bill from the big roll, tossed the billfold back down beside the man.

"That makes us even, Abbott," Haver gritted. "Now yuh can take yore show an' go to hell!"

He turned and mounted. Roaring like a bull, Promoter Abbott got to his thick, stubby legs. He held his wallet in his clenched fist.

"I'll get you for this, Haver!" he raged furiously. "You can't get away with this! Yuh've robbed me! You—"

He was still yelling as Dal Haver rode off. Circling the sheds, Haver looked back. Cowboys were running from the corrals up to where Abbott stood fuming. They couldn't do that to Promoter Abbott, he was screaming. They didn't rob him and get away with it. He kept telling the cowboys to mount and go after Haver, but none of them moved.

HAVER grinned as he struck the road into Pecos. He knew none of those rodeo hands would come for him. Maybe Abbott would try to do something nasty through the law, but by that time Dal Haver would be long gone—headed north. Abbott had a good swat in the jaw coming to him, and Dal Haver had his four hundred.

It was only a half mile into Pecos. Haver rode up to the post office in town, dismounted, trailing reins. He went inside and wrote a letter. It was addressed to Johnny Phillips, Hondo, New Mexico. It was just a brief note that read:

Dear Johnny:

I'm glad things are going so well with you. Quit worrying about me. The money I been sending you to buy stock with has been coming so easy it's a shame to take it. A six-year-old button could ride the nags these folks call buckers.

I'm quitting today and heading up there. My boss kinda hates to see me leave; he's funny that way. I'll pay off that mortgage against our place when I get to Hondo, then come on out to the ranch. Look for me about Wednesday night. It's nice you met such a swell girl like that Judy Helm. Only watch out, her being the sheriff's daughter.

Your pard,

Dal.

Haver mailed it, stepped outside to his horse. He had just mounted and started north along the dusty hot street when he turned to the sound of riders clattering into town behind him. One glance told Haver one of the horsebackers was a lawman. The other rider was a fat gent, having a hard time staying in the saddle.

They spotted Haver. The lawman flung up one arm, began yelling in the name of the law. Promoter Abbott clutched the kak horn with his left hand, shook his right fist.

Haver heard their yells. Ducking low over his horse's neck, he touched spurs, hammered out of town, straight north. He struck the rolling brush country, looked back. The two men were still coming but they were losing ground.

Haver grinned. It made him look younger when he did that. Some of the tired look left his blue eyes. But he knew Abbott wasn't the kind who would take a bust on the jaw and forget it. Not only that, but Abbott had been held to a bargain for once in his life. He'd do a lot of things for one hundred dollars.

But Dal Haver only grinned. That night, after eating a hurried meal of garlic and frijoles at the 'dobe of a Mexican goat herder, Haver rode into the brackish strip adjoining the Pecos River and made dry camp. He took a cartridge belt and holstered gun from his blanket roll. He had

the gun strapped about him when he rode on north next morning at break of day.

CHAPTER II

Hondo Town

FIVE nights later, atop a rimrock ledge, Dal Haver reined in his palamino and gazed down through the moonlight at the twinkling lights of Hondo town. Those lights seemed to beckon to Haver with the promise of a bountiful future.

Somewhere a few miles farther north of town, against the toe of the Sacramentos, Johnny Phillips would be waiting for him at their little homestead. Haver thrilled with the thoughts of what lay ahead. Johnny had written him about their three hundred and twenty acre spread. He'd told how he was building corrals, buying a few white-faced breeder stuff with the money Haver had been sending him.

A wonderful country was this Hondo Valley with its deep lush grass, rimmed by the pine-studded peaks. A cowman's paradise after the prickly-pear country Dal Haver had ridden through.

Haver smiled contentedly and some of the deep weariness left his eyes. He eased his jaded horse down the slope. Across the rolling floor of the valley he put his palamino to a pace-eating trot. He'd ride into town and get a bite to eat first.

He came to a rutted wagon-trail that led straight north toward Hondo. Thick clumps of mesquite hemmed in the trail, making it look like a white, twisting ribbon. The full moon shone down, shadowing Haver's face beneath the curled brim of his Stetson. Somewhere off to the right the plaintive moan of a bedded herd rose above the dull beat of the horse's hoofs.

Haver swerved his pony around a curve in the trail. Suddenly the animal's ears pricked forward. Haver tensed, his right hand dropping to the gun at his hip. A rider was blocking the trail.

Haver caught the glint of moonlight on the barrel of the gun in the man's fist. He drew in, waited. Coolly, speculatively, he watched the man knee his horse forward.

When the rider came up in front of Haver he peered intently through the gloom into the youth's face. He grunted. It was the first sound he had made.

"Hmm, just a button."

Haver's face was expressionless. He looked like a statue, sitting there astride his horse.

"Votin' age an' more," he said calmly.

Beneath his black Stetson the man's beady eyes slitted. "Smart," he grunted.

"Mebby," said Haver.

Beady-eyes might have taken a tip from Haver's voice if he had been smart. There was something too cold and patient about Dal Haver. A gent like that usually moves like lightning when he moves.

The rider's eyes looked like a snake's before he strikes. Haver read the death promise in those shining orbs. He saw the killer brand upon the man's smirking features.

"You happen to be Dal Haver?" the gunman finally asked.

Haver nodded; admitted that's who he was.

"I thought so," the man grunted. "You an' another fella got a homestead out no'th of town. Yuh been rodeoin' down in Texas."

In a flash Haver thought he understood. This gent was a lawman. Word had been sent ahead by Abbott saying that he had been robbed by Dal Haver. Haver figured he was wanted by the law. Yet this gent displayed no badge.

"You the law?" Haver asked, stalling.

A smirking grin twisted the killer's lips. "Yeah, I represent what law they is in Hondo. I been on the lookout for yuh, Haver."

"I'm here."

"Yeah, an' yuh ain't goin' into Hondo."

Haver knew the showdown had come. Puzzled by being confronted by this gun-fingering killer who knew so much, Haver had watched and waited his chance to go for the draw. He knew this man was going to kill him.

He watched the man's thumb draw back the gun-hammer. He heard it click. The man grinned wolfishly, taking Haver's silence to be terror.

Then Haver's right hand moved, blurred down to the gun at his hip even as he threw himself from the saddle. Two guns streaked red flames in the moonlight.

There had been no frenzy to Haver's draw. Just the split-second speed of a man who has lived clean, and practised a lot.

NO sound came from Bead-eyes. Through the smoke, Haver saw the man's eyes pop with horror. He toppled from the back of his rearing horse, hit the ground, motionless.

Heart pounding, Haver rose slowly to his feet. Gun still in his fist, he stepped over to where the man lay. There was a bullet hole through his forehead. Haver turned away, holstering his gun.

He found his horse off to one side in the brush. Mounting, he looked around for the killer's animal, but it was nowhere in sight. Then touching gentle spurs, he rode on through the gloom toward the twinkling lights of Hondo town, a half mile to the north.

"Funny," he mused grimly. "The law don't seem to take prisoners in Hondo. They kill 'em."

He rode warily on to the outskirts of the town, his left hand holding the knotted reins, his right hand hanging loosely down near the butt of his gun.

Dal Haver didn't ride into the center of the town. He skirted the outlying 'dobe homes and came into what he judged to be the Mexican quarter.

It would be safer, he decided, making his first appearance in Mex town. Mexicans have a habit of seeing a lot and saying little; but Dal Haver knew how to get them to talk.

If that man he had gunned out on the trail was really the sheriff—a hell of a lawman he had turned out to be. It's not the ordinary sheriff's code to kill a man for just smacking a crooked rodeo promoter and taking what money is due him.

Haver rode stiff-backed and straight in the kak, eyes raking the gloom of the narrow street. Flat-roofed 'dobes hemmed him in on both sides. Shadows flung themselves from those buildings, out into the moonlit street. Dark figures stood in doorways. Candlelight seeped out into the night from beneath half-drawn shades. The chatter of Mexicans echoed in the street, diminishing to silence as Haver rode past.

Haver felt the impact of curious eyes. Farther ahead, where this side street joined the main drag, there came the blare of voices and tinpanny music from a saloon. There might be some semblance of law in Hondo town, but it stayed pretty well under cover. Down there on the main street, Haver glimpsed men with guns on their hips. A curly wolf, Hondo town, with all the earmarks of lawlessness.

Haver spotted a rambling 'dobe home to his right. There was a board sign over the door. It read: *"Casa de pupilos"*—Boarding House. He pulled over toward it, dismounted.

Spurs jingling, he stepped right up to the door. An elderly Mexican answered his knock. He had a lamp in one hand. The yellow rays played over his anxious face made his white hair look silvery.

"Si, Senor?" he murmured uneasily.

"I'd like a meal and lodging for the night," Haver told him in Spanish.

The Mexican hesitated. Suspicion, something akin to fear flicked into his eyes. Not many Americans patronized his place, he told Haver. But the senor was welcome.

Haver stepped into the front room. There were three tables in here and chairs, and upon the plastered wall

was a picture of a mustachioed general.

"Don't want to put you out," said Haver. "I'll just eat a bite of supper, put up my horse and then turn in. I'll be riding out first thing in the morning."

"You are welcome," said the Mexican.

He smiled, placed the lamp on one of the tables and stepped to a curtained doorway that led into the kitchen. He called an order to someone who was rattling pots and pans in the other room. One glance told Haver this man was more than just a *mozo*. The Mexican had the finely chiseled features of a Castillian.

The Mexican turned. "We have not much to offer," he said apologetically. "Business is not good. Our charge is small, but we have few patrons."

Haver said everything was all right. "You have a shed behind where I can keep my horse?"

"*Si*, Senor."

THE Mexican went with him outside to his horse. He led the way around the house to a small shed at the rear. After tending to his mount, they went back inside. Haver washed in a basin in the front room, then sat down to the meal of frijoles, tacos and black coffee which a tired-eyed Mexican woman served him.

As he ate Haver listened to the old Mexican couple talk. They were proud of their American patron. They were surprised he talked their tongue so well.

"You are a stranger, no?" the Mexican asked.

Haver told him he was. "I'm up from Texas."

"A Tejano," said the Mexican thoughtfully.

"Dal Haver's my name. My partner Johnny Phillips, homesteaded just north of town and I've come up to join him. Maybe yuh know him."

A startled, frightened look flicked into the Mexican's eyes. He looked quickly into the wide eyes of his wife. Haver thought a warning message passed between them.

"I did some work for Juan Phillip's" the Mexican murmured awesomely. "A fine man, Senor."

"One of the finest," Haver said softly. "Johnny Phillips and me are like brothers."

He couldn't understand why the old Mexican couple acted so strangely. There were a lot of things he wanted to learn from them.

"A nice town is Hondo," he said casually. "Is it not so, Senor?"

"*Dios*, no!" the Mexican blurted. Then he caught another warning look from his wife. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Senor, perhaps it is best for me not to pass judgment upon the town."

Hell was on the loose in Hondo town if he was reading sign right. As he finished his meal he listened to the Mexican talk of the days when he had owned a large grant of land here in Hondo Valley. There had been cattle and *vaqueros*. From his portico one could see his land as far as the eye could reach.

"You have it no longer?" asked Haver.

"Ah, no," the Mexican said regretfully. "It has all been taken from me." A new light of hate crept into his dark eyes. "It has all been stolen from me by—"

"*Pedro!*" cried the Mexican woman.

Haver saw the futility of trying to learn more from these people. He rose, paid for his meal and one night's lodging.

Then he crossed the room, got his hat from a wall-peg and walked to the door. He looked back.

"I got a little business with a gent by the name of Dice Kegley. I'll be back soon."

He stepped out the door and missed the look of fear that leaped into the Mexican couple's eyes. He pulled his hat low, strode quickly along the moonlit street toward the center of town.

Coming out on the main street he found Hondo like the other little mountain towns he had drifted through coming up from Texas. There were two rows of false-fronted buildings. Horses lined the

hitch-racks in front of two main saloons.

The clink of chips, whiskey-talk and laughter filtered out into the night through the batwing doors. A few men stood in the shadows along the plank walk. Men in boots, with guns at their hips, talking about cows and horses.

Haver clumped stiffly past them, getting no more than a brief glance. He felt oddly embarrassed, marching along with a gun at his hip. Down in Texas he didn't need one riding for a rodeo. But up here it seemed the custom.

In the pocket of his faded Levis was four hundred dollars. Three hundred of that would go to Big Dice Kegley, the saloonman in Hondo.

JOHNNY had written about Kegley. He'd told how he had been forced to borrow that amount from Kegley to make the necessary improvements on the homestead. Dice Kegley was the only gent in Hondo who loaned money, Phillips said. Kegley was town-boss, money-lender—a gambler, hard as the hubs of hell, but the only one to turn to in a pinch. He had a henchman named Jake Freeman. They ruled Hondo Valley.

Haver saw the sign: "Kegley's Crystal Palace Saloon," above the batwing doors of a 'dobe building across the street. There was a huge lantern hanging above the sign. Haver grinned. Not much of a palace. It looked more like a huge livery stable, blazing with light.

Then Haver stopped, stiffening. Just ahead of him along the walk stood a man and a girl. Haver hadn't intended to eavesdrop. But the rasping, threatening voice of the man stung his ears. He saw the girl's hand fly to her lips. She gave a choked cry. They didn't see Haver.

"You—you can't!"

The man's grating laugh stopped the girl's cry. He was a tall, raw-boned gent, double-gunned. He swayed a little on his wide-spread, polelike legs.

"Listen, sweetheart, I—"

He stopped then, turned, bristling. Haver came up beside them. He didn't look at the girl. All he saw was the sneering-lipped gent whose hot eyes shot toward him.

"Want something, kid?" the man snarled.

"I couldn't help hearin'—"

"Then get the hell on down the street!"

"We don't talk like that to ladies in Texas," said Haver quietly.

"Texican," smirked the man.

"Texan," corrected Haver softly.

He just stood there. The girl stared at him like a stricken person. This tall, gun-freighted gent's hatchet face blackened with fury.

"Why—"

He made a lunge, a curse blubbering past his lips. Haver swung. His fist lashed out like the hoof of a kicking bronc. It caught the tall gent on the cheek-bone. Through a dancing red haze of anger, Haver saw the man reel back, sprawl in the dusty street. The girl was screaming. Men were suddenly pouring out the doors of the saloon across the way.

Whirling, Haver grabbed one of the girl's hands. There was no chance of fighting the whole mob. Evidently that tall gent down there in the dust had plenty of friends.

Then Haver was running through a dark lane between two of the buildings, still gripping the girl's hand, half dragging her. A gun roared in the street. Haver heard the whine of the bullet above his head. His eyes flamed. Those men back there had seen the girl.

Behind the buildings he raced through the darkness toward the edge of town. But he didn't look back at the girl.

"Come on, foolish!" he panted. "You're goin' home—under escort!"

And he didn't stop until he heard the girl's protesting cry.

CHAPTER III

Dice Kegley Celebrates

HAVER halted. He hadn't realized they had come so far from the center of town. He led the girl into the fretted shadows beneath a cottonwood tree. They weren't over fifty feet from the rear of one of the outlying 'dobe homes. Ahead of them lay the dark brush that stretched out endlessly across the valley.

Haver tensed, listening to the faint yells that came from behind them. Then he looked at the girl. She stood close to him, eyes blazing, gasping for breath. She only came about to his shoulders.

"Oh, you fool!" she said panting.

Haver grinned foolishly. He tried to think of the right thing to say.

"Yes, ma'am," he said meekly. He had never seen a girl just like her before. She was dressed in a checked gingham dress. Dark hair framed the beauty of her face.

"A girl like you oughtn't be out on the street alone at night," he told her. "Seems like it ain't really safe."

She glared at him, breast rising and falling. "I'm safe anyplace," she fired. "I'm the sheriff's daughter."

Haver started, flushing. "You're Judy Helm then," he said quickly.

"Yes."

They said nothing for a full moment. Just stood there facing one another. Then Haver realized he was still holding her hand. She pulled free.

"How did you know my name?" she asked sharply.

Haver's mind raced as some of his embarrassment fled. "Where's yore father?"

"In the house."

"Which house?"

She forgot her anger then. She smiled a little, indicated the 'dobe home nearby. They were in the backyard of her own home.

"Shore yore father's in there?"

"He was, a while ago, when I sneaked out."

Haver looked at the house. Blinds were pulled low at the windows. But there was a light inside. He wondered what kind of a sheriff this girl's father was, allowing his daughter to be insulted by a town bully.

It hadn't been just a chance meeting she'd had with that man. Haver had gathered that from the snatches of their talk. This girl knew him. Haver couldn't *sabe* it. This girl, Johnny's girl, holding clandestine meetings with a town bully—being insulted by him.

Flashing remembrance came to Haver of the man who had tried to gun him on the way into town. He knew positively now it hadn't been this girl's father.

"You'd better go now," the girl was saying. "You'd better leave town. There'll be trouble. I've got to go in. I'm—I'm being married tomorrow."

Haver caught the bitterness, the misery in the girl's voice. She wasn't angry now. She was crying, turning to leave.

"Johnny wrote me you an' him was planning to be married sometime. I didn't know you'd figgered on doin' it so soon."

The girl stopped. In the gloom her face was white as alkali. A stark look of tragedy flooded her eyes. Then she ran back to where he stood.

"Then you're Dal Haver!" She placed one hand gently on his arm. She seemed so pitifully small just standing there. "Johnny told me all about you. But—but it's not Johnny I'm marrying."

Sudden anger boiled up in Haver He watched the girl's eyes close to hide the awful hurt in their depths as her quivering fingers tightened on his arm.

"No, not Johnny," she whispered brokenly. "It's Dice Kegley I'm marrying. Johnny is dead."

Dal Haver made a low sound like a man who has been stabbed in the back. The darkness seemed to close in on him as the girl's words throbbed in his ears. He wanted to

cry out and tell her it wasn't the truth. Down in the pit of his stomach there was an awful ache.

"God!" he whispered huskily. "Johnny—dead?"

Then in a dazed way he listened to the girl sob how they had found Johnny Phillips at the edge of town one morning a week ago. Bushwhacked. They didn't know who had done it. Her father, Sheriff Tom Helm, had found no clue. Now Dice Kegley, the saloonman, had taken over the homestead.

"Dice Kegley controls the valley now," the girl sobbed breathlessly. "And he'll be elected sheriff tomorrow."

"Against yore father?" Haver rapped.

"Yes."

"An' you're marrying him!" Haver blazed. His voice was tremulous with bitterness and scorn. "Talkin' marriage to another man when—when Johnny Phillips has only been dead a week."

HAVER'S words ran on and on—Hot, snarling words. He didn't realize he was tearing the very heart out of the girl. All he knew was that Johnny was dead. All his dreams collapsed, stunning him. Nothing mattered now but killing the bushwhacker who had killed Johnny Phillips.

"I'll get him! I'll get him!" he choked.

He didn't realize he had been clutching the girl's arms. He looked down, saw she was crying, stricken with grief. Pale, shaken, he released her and stepped back.

"They'll kill you," was all she could say.

Haver wanted to say more. But the words wouldn't come. Stunned by the news of Johnny's death, plagued with a hundred tormenting thoughts, he turned and ran through the darkness toward town.

Dal Haver didn't hear Judy Helm's anguished cry. He didn't see her rush into the house. And he didn't stop until he came up to the rear of one of the big buildings in the center of town.

There in the darkness he paused, panting for breath. His throat ached. Names whirled through his brain: Judy Helm, her father, the sheriff. Big Dice Kegley. He thought of all that Judy Helm had told him. Hate overshadowed the grief in his eyes.

"I hate her!" he told himself. "I hate her."

That's what he tried to make himself believe, but it was no use. He knew he didn't hate her.

He knew a grief had been roweling Judy Helm that she couldn't put into words. And then Haver thought of Big Dice Kegley.

Tugging his hat brim low over his smoldering eyes, he eased through the darkness between two of the buildings. He came out on the street. Things were still booming in Hondo town. Patches of light speared through the windows of the two main saloons. It showed lines of saddled horses standing at the tie-poles.

Men with low-swung guns stood in groups along the plank walk. They didn't look like cowmen to Haver; those gents had the brand of gunmen. Haver wondered, if Big Dice Kegley was town boss, then these were his men.

With grim resolve, Haver strode boldly across the street toward the Crystal Palace Saloon. He waited for a yell of recognition from some of the loafers along the walk, but none came. Evidently those men didn't recognize him as the man who had started a fight only a few minutes before.

Haver was thankful for the darkness. He didn't want anyone to spot him; not just yet. He pushed through the batwing doors of the saloon. Just inside the crowded room he stopped.

Men lined the long bar. Hard men whose hoarse talk muffled all other sounds. Poker tables at the rear of the smoke-clouded room were filled. Across the face of the plate-glass mirror behind the bar somebody had scrawled with a tallow candle: "Vote for Dice Kegley for Sheriff."

Behind the bar, the perspiring bar-

keep couldn't handle the trade. Then one man reeled out a pace from the bar. He had a drink in one hand. His harsh words struck high above the rumble.

"Here's to Dice Kegley!" he bawled thickly. "The next sheriff!"

Haver spotted Dice Kegley then. He was standing near the speaker. He was tall, massively-built, dressed in a black suit, the pants stuffed into

the tops of his hand-sewn boots. He had a thin black mustache above his thick upper lip and a square-jawed face that showed power.

He smiled at the chorus of yells from his henchmen as drinks lifted. He swaggered out from the bar a pace, and faced the line of drinkers.

"Thank you, gents!" he boomed. Silence fell over the barroom. "Just bein' elected sheriff tomorrer ain't all that's happenin'. I'm marryin' the purtiest filly in the county. I'm marryin' old Helm's daughter!"

Hoarse yells of congratulation echoed in the packed barroom. More drinks lifted. Men surged around Kegley, pumping his hand. Big Dice Kegley stood head and shoulders above them, laughing and talking, his voice lost in the uproar.

A MAN at the bar saw Haver standing just inside the doors. He nudged the man next to him. All down the line of drinkers heads turned. But Haver didn't move, he just stood there staring at Big Dice Kegley's heavy profile. Noises began to wane. But Kegley didn't seem to notice anything wrong.

"Yes, sir," he thundered triumphantly. "Big Dice Kegley, cow-king of Hondo Valley, sheriff an' now a married man!" He laughed and looked at his henchmen. Then for the first time he realized that no one was paying any attention.

"What the—"

"Nothin', Dice," the man beside him chirped. "I just seen that there jasper standin' by the door starin'."

Big Dice Kegley turned, lowering his drink to the bar. He saw Dal Haver. But there was no recognition in his eyes, only anger that his show should be interrupted.

"Well, what yuh want, cowboy?" he barked.

Spurs chiming, Dal Haver moved up in front of Kegley and stopped. His blue eyes burned with the fires of hate.

"I want to talk to you, Kegley," he said quietly.

Big Dice Kegley's face bloated with fury. His furtive black eyes flicked about him at the staring men. Then he looked back at Haver and grinned.

"I don't talk business the night before my weddin'," he rumbled. "Better run along, young fellow."

"Ain't in the habit of runnin', Kegley. I've come a long ways to see you."

Haver wasn't just an ordinary cowhand. Kegley must have seen that. This young gent, just a jump beyond the voting age, had eyes that were too old.

"Who are you?" Kegley asked.

"Dal Haver."

Big Dice Kegley stiffened as if jarred with an electric current. His face paled and the blustering words that started from him stopped. A rear door in the barroom slammed. He turned, quickly. Only Haver's eyes moved. He saw the tall, hatchet-faced gent he had knocked down. As he recognized Haver he stopped, both hands stabbing gunward.

"Kegley!" he bellowed. "That there's—"

"Hold it, Freeman!" Kegley roared flinging both hands into the air. "This here is Dal Haver!"

But guns were already swishing from holsters.

CHAPTER IV

Showdown

NOT a shot was fired. Haver was never to know why. Crouched, the gun poking from his right fist, he stood near big Dice Kegley, facing the hatchet-faced gent called Freeman. Dal Haver knew he was perched on death's doorstep. He knew, too, in that fleeting second, that Dice Kegley had a reason for wanting him to live—for a time. Now as he slowly holstered his gun he listened to Kegley tell Jake Freeman to get a drink and forget.

"Drink up, you gents!" Kegley was howling to his henchmen. "Guess this here fellow just wants a job. I'll talk to you, Haver—in the back room."

He turned on his polished heel and strode through the gaping crowd to a rear door. Dice Kegley was a power in Hondo town all right. There was no doubt of that. When he spoke men jumped. When he told them to drink and forget, that's what they did.

The noise began again as Haver followed Kegley into the back room. Kegley plumped his huge frame down into a chair behind a battered-topped desk in the center of the room.

"Set down, Haver."

Haver was standing with his back to the closed door. He moved out a couple of steps.

"It won't take me long to have my say, Kegley," he said tightly as he ignored the chair.

Dice Kegley tried to smile. "Yore pard Johnny Phillips said you was comin' to town. He's dead, you know."

"I know," said Haver.

"I been expectin' you."

"So was another gent out on the trail."

Kegley's eyes wouldn't hold still. "What yuh mean, Haver?"

Haver told him of the man who had tried to kill him out at the edge of town.

"What happened?" Kegley asked uneasily.

"I killed him," the young cowman said unemotionally.

Then Dal Haver produced his roll of four hundred dollars. He peeled off three hundred dollars and tossed them in front of Kegley.

"That pays off the mortgage, Kegley. Now give me the papers."

Big Dice Kegley rose to his feet. "Mortgage?" he boomed. "What yuh talkin' about, fella?"

"You know the mortgage I mean, Kegley. Johnny borrowed three hundred from you. The mortgage note ain't due for a month yet. But I'm payin' it off now. An' I'm givin' you notice to clear off the homestead."

Big Dice Kegley laughed. "Yuh're loco, Haver! I hold no mortgage against that homestead where Phillips was squattin'. Phillips lost that place in a poker game. I bought the papers from the gent who won it."

Kegley's mocking words beat into Haver's senses. Through a dancing red haze he saw the hateful, sneering face of the big town boss. He watched Kegley reach for the roll of bills, stuff them into his pocket.

"Phillips just tricked you, Haver," Kegley was smirking. "He—"

Something snapped in Haver's mind when Kegley said that. There never was a squarer shooter in the world than Johnny Phillips. Kegley must have sensed he had said too much. Cursing, his hand stabbed to a hideout gun beneath his black coat. Haver let drive his right fist. It smashed into Kegley's thick lips, throttling his curse to a gurgle.

Back over the chair, Kegley sprawled, then crumpled to the floor motionless. Haver whirled toward the door that led into the barroom. Somebody was beating against it, yelling for Kegley.

There was a single window in the room. Haver lunged toward it as Kegley began pulling himself to his feet. Haver shattered the glass with his boot. He was crouched on the sill, poised for to leap when the door crashed inward.

Haver jumped. Guns roared in the

back room as men rushed in. Haver felt lead burn his side. He struck the ground, his high-heeled boots rolling him in the dust. Scrambling to his feet, he looked up at the lighted window in time to see a man's head and shoulders appear. A gun in the man's hand blared.

Haver felt the wind from the bullet close to his cheek. His own gun leaped into his fist. He flung one shot toward the window and saw the man fall back. Now Kegley's men were barging out through the front doors of the saloon. Inside in the barroom Kegley was bellowing like a bull. It seemed to Haver as if hell was on the loose!

He ducked into the dark doorway of a deserted 'dobe hut behind one of the buildings on the main street. His heart pounded. He stood there, panting, thinking what a fool he had been to give Dice Kegley the three hundred dollars before learning everything.

Haver was positive now that Kegley had sent that gunman out on the trail to meet him. Then the reason why Kegley had made such a move dawned on Haver. Johnny Phillips had never received the letter Haver had mailed from Pecos. Somebody else had got that letter and knew that he was arriving tonight.

SOMETHING told Haver that Kegley was responsible for Phillips murder. He'd had Johnny killed, the mortgage destroyed. Haver saw through it now. Kegley wanted their homestead. Johnny had written that their homestead controlled much of the water in the valley. And he had written that Kegley, drunk with ambitions to be a cow-king and own a lot of land, wanted to buy their place.

Every taut fiber in Haver's muscular body tingled with hate. His right hand, still clutching his gun, was clammy. His mind raced with a plan.

Haver stepped out of the shadow, sprinted around the corner of the building. He almost collided with a man coming toward him. Haver's gun leaped up.

"Hook the moon, mister!" he grated softly. "One squawk an' I'm shootin'!"

"Haver! Dal Haver!" the man yapped excitedly. "Stay yore trigger finger there, yuh young hellion! Let me talk!"

He had to stop for breath. His half-drawn gun dropped back into leather. He eased back into the shadows of the building beside Haver.

"How'd yuh know me?"

Haver lowered his gun. The man was still trying to catch his breath. There was a star on his sagging vest. In the darkness his eyes blazed.

"Know yuh?" the lawman fumed. "How the hell could I keep from knowin' yuh! Pedro Yvarra just told me all about yuh. Then I got a picture of you through the mails today tellin' me to hold yuh for assault an' robbery. I'm Tom Helm, sheriff—"

"An' you were huntin' me to pinch me for smackin' a crooked rodeo promoter an' takin' the money due me!"

"Hell, no!" stormed the oldster. "Whatever it was it's just a stink in the wind compared to the hell that's poppin' here."

The sounds of Kegley's men struck through the night, coming closer. "Talk fast, Helm," gritted Haver. "I got one chore to do now—kill the skunk that bushwhacked Johnny Phillips. Yuh know who did it?"

"Not positive yet, son. I'm goin' to know for certain damn soon, though. Yuh've showed me they's one gent in the world that would tackle Dice Kegley an' I'm backin' yuh the limit. I was just comin' to help yuh!"

"You'll get a chance," Haver snapped beneath his breath. "Here they come. Can't hightail now. Steady, Sheriff!"

"Steady, hell! *I'm thinkin' of Judy!*"

Three running men came out of the shadows between two of the buildings, stopped in the moonlight not ten feet from where Haver stood beside Sheriff Tom Helm. One of

those three men was Big Dice Kegley. He had a gun dangling from his right hand. Kegley was swearing like a mule-skinner, looking all about.

"Five hundred for the hide of that damned Texan!" Kegley bellowed.

Haver caught his breath. Sheriff Helm was leaping out into the moonlight.

"I'll collect that five hundred, Kegley!" the old sheriff blurted wrathfully. "I'm on the lookout for him, too!"

Kegley whirled, jerked stiff as if he had been stabbed. He looked as if he couldn't believe his eyes. So surprised was he at the sudden appearance of the old sheriff, Kegley didn't look at the darkened doorway where Haver crouched.

"Ain't askin' yore help in this, Helm!" Kegley snarled, "Get home to Judy."

Sheriff Helm's laugh cut him short. It wasn't a pleasant laugh. It came from a gent who didn't seem to give a damn what happened. Helm's gun jutted from his fist.

"I've taken my last order from you, Kegley!" barked the old lawman. "Mebbe I can rid some of the skunk smell I got on me with gunsmoke. I'm takin' yuh in, Kegley, for the murder of—"

Gun thunder jarred into the night. As if from nowhere, men came running out into the pale moonlight. Men whose angry cries and blasting guns were coming to the assistance of their boss, big Dice Kegley.

Out of the shadows leaped Dal Haver. He disregarded the odds he was bucking. Odds didn't matter now. Dice Kegley had killed Johnny Phillips. Dice Kegley had to die—even as the courageous little sheriff with the spewing guns was dying.

Haver saw Sheriff Helm's knees buckle. He saw Dice Kegley and the man at his side whirl, their guns spitting red flames. Other men were surging toward him, firing at him as they ran. Ducking, weaving, crouching, Haver reached the body of the sheriff.

Dice Kegley was still on his feet. Haver took aim. His trigger finger tightened. Then it seemed as if the night had exploded in front of Haver's eyes. He felt no pain. Funny, but his knees wouldn't hold his weight any longer. Then he fell, and the last he remembered was hearing Dice Kegley's grating laugh.

CHAPTER V

Jail-Bait

DAL HAVER blinked open his eyes. His first maddening thought was that he was blind. Darkness greeted him. Pain stabbed into the side of his head. He bit back a groan and closed his eyes again.

For a long moment he lay flat on his back, trying to push back the fog in his brain. Then all that had happened came to him. Probing fingers told him he had a deep bullet crease across his forehead, just above his right eye.

He sat up, looked about. He saw the one barred window and the black night outside. Off to his left was a cell door that led into a corridor where a sputtering kerosene lamp shed a yellow glow of light.

Puzzled by all that had happened, Haver sat with his chin in his hands, staring off across the dark cell. Then he started at the sound of a scraping boot heel, the creak of a swivel chair somewhere up in the front of the jail. That would be the jailer up there, but it wouldn't be Sheriff Helm. He recalled the fiery old sheriff falling in the fight with Kegley.

Sheriff Helm's last words strummed through Haver's aching body. "Steady, hell! *I'm thinkin' of Judy!*"

Haver groaned softly. He closed his eyes to hold back the pain that shot through them. Sitting there in the gloom of the cell he didn't look like a young gent just past voting age. He looked like a haggard, pale-faced man who has been through hell.

"I'll square things, Johnny Phillips," he whispered.

That's all he said. And then he

opened his eyes, conscious of muted noises from the Crystal Palace that filtered into his cell. He rose, strode tiredly to the cell window. It was still dark outside—the thick darkness just before dawn.

Haver turned, looked through the barred door down the dimly-lit corridor. The front door of the office opened and slammed. A man said something in a booming voice. Then big Dice Kegley was striding down the corridor toward Haver's cell.

Kegley looked like a huge grizzly bear, as he swayed before the cell door. He was drunk. Atop his head at a jaunty angle was a white Stetson. He came up to the cell door, gripped the bars with his hamlike hands. He peered through the bars at Dal Haver standing inside in the gloom.

"My first prisoner," he said, grinning.

"You ain't sheriff yet, Kegley," said Haver quietly.

KEGLEY'S grin broadened. The mustache across his lip resembled a wavy black pencil line. His bloodshot eyes glowed like the tips of cigarettes.

"I will be in another three hours," he boomed triumphantly. "Helm's dead and there won't be a vote cast agin me because they'll be afraid to. I'll own this whole damn valley some day and have things my own way!"

Swelling with ego, Dice Kegley kept talking, his rumbling words growing louder. Kegley was drunk or he wouldn't have said so much ordinarily. Gone was the suave, smooth-talking saloonman now who had ambitions to be a cow-king and sheriff of Hondo.

Haver let him talk while every taut muscle of his tall body trembled. His face grew a shade whiter and a strange new light came into his feverish eyes—a killer's light.

"Yuh're goin' back to Texas, Haver!" Kegley laughed drunkenly. "After we downed you and brought yuh here I got to searchin' through some papers in the front office. I didn't know you was wanted down in Pecos for stealin' a rodeo promoter's money an' then tryin' to kill him.

"I found the wire from the sheriff in Pecos. He said to be on the lookout for yuh. Too bad, Haver. Seems like you an' Johnny Phillips kinda got took for a loss up here."

Kegley's taunting words beat with maddening regularity into Haver's mind. He forgot the pain in his head. His eyes froze on the big saloonman's face.

"You killed Johnny Phillips," said Haver softly.

His words seemed to do something to Big Dice Kegley. The grin fell from his thick lips.

"That's yore death warrant, Haver," said Kegley in a low snarl. "You know too much."

Haver knew what he meant. But there was no fear in his eyes. He wanted to learn more. He took a step nearer the door.

"You killed him!" he yelled. "You killed Johnny Phillips!"

That yelling accusation had its effect on Dice Kegley.

"What if I did kill him? Yuh ain't got no proof of it. Yuh ain't goin' back to Texas. You're goin' the same way Phillips went." Then Kegley went mad.

"Damn right I killed him! I wanted that homestead for the water that's on it. He told me that mortgage would be paid by you. I tried to buy the place an' he wouldn't sell. He died one night, that's all. I was just feedin' you about losin' the place in a poker game."

"An' you got hold of the letter I mailed Phillips from Pecos, tellin' the day I'd be in," Haver whispered hoarsely.

"Smart for a young Texican, ain't yuh? An' you might as well know I sent one of my men out on the trail to stop yuh. I didn't want to make a scene beefin' yuh in town. There's been enough—"

"There'll be more, Kegley."

"What yuh mean, Haver? What yuh goin' to do about it?"

Haver waited a moment. And then he said almost in a whisper, "Kill a man! You!"

Kegley laughed. It was the nervous, harsh laugh of a man who suddenly realizes he has said too much.

"Wouldn't kill a man on his weddin' day would yuh, Haver?" he taunted. "Judy Helm is marryin' me today. She's always wanted me."

Kegley said more. But Haver tried to shut the words out. He turned, went back to the window. He hardly knew when Kegley, cursing and muttering to himself, departed. For several minutes he stood at the window, watching the black sky in the east lighten to a pale grey.

HE listened to the sound of men's voices coming from Kegley's saloon. Kegley's men were down there, celebrating. Drinking to their victory, laughing and talking. And far off yonder in Hondo Valley honest cowmen were rising to greet a new day. Cowmen who rebelled at Dice Kegley's dominance in the valley. But men who lacked a leader to fight back and break Kegley's yoke.

Haver cursed through bloodless lips. He didn't hear the two men come down the corridor toward his cell, but he turned at the sound of their voices. One of the men was Jake Freeman. He glared through the bars at Haver out of his blackened eye. The man beside Freeman wore a black cape and broad-brimmed black hat, that failed to hide all his silvery hair. He was a Mexican *padre*.

"Five minutes yuh git with the prisoner," Freeman growled. "No more."

He was unlocking the cell door. "That is long enough for a man of mercy," said the Mexican in Spanish.

Haver started at the Mexican's voice. His mind flashed back to where he had heard it before, but he made no move. He had never seen a Mexican calmer than the one who walked across the gloomy cell toward him. As Freeman clanged shut the door and locked it, the Mexican smiled.

"I come to soothe your ills, my son," the old man said. "I heard of the fight in which you were wounded—"

Freeman was down at the far end of the corridor. He was out of view when he stepped into the front office.

"Pedro!" whispered Haver tensely.

The Mexican smiled for the first time. "Years ago I studied for the priesthood. I kept my cloaks. Tonight I find them very convenient."

Haver's heart was pounding. Joy, hope leaped into his deep-set eyes. He had to throttle his impulse to yell for joy when Pedro quickly handed him a six-gun that had been stuffed into his belt beneath the cape. The Mexican had another gun for himself.

"You know all that has happened?" Haver snapped softly.

"Everything," the Mexican whispered. "Sheriff Helm told me all before he died."

Words seemed such futile things now. Each man read the other's mind. They waited. Slow seconds passed. There was something calm and deadly about the way Pedro Yvarra sat on the edge of the bunk and waited.

Then he rose and went to the door. "My duty is done, Senor Freeman," he called.

Jake Freeman swaggered back down the corridor, jingling some keys in one hand. His tall, bony figure stooped to unlock the door and Pedro stepped out.

"Thank you, *perro*," he said strangely.

The Mexican didn't say that like a *padre*. Jake Freeman, the killer, wasn't accustomed to being called a dog. The gunman whirled, cursing. Haver came out the open door. He and Pedro had guns in their fists. Freeman's jaw fell. His eyes bugged with disbelief. Then the hoarse cry that started in his throat died as Pedro's gun barrel streaked down like a bolt of lightning.

They carried him inside the cell, took the keys from his limp fingers, and locked the door behind them. Then Haver was racing toward the front door, Pedro Yvarra at his heels, an odd little figure wearing

the raiment of a Mexican *padre.*

"To Helm's *casa!*" Pedro gasped. "*El diablo* has guided Kegley there—"

His words were lost. Haver was already out the front door of the office, racing down the middle of the deserted street toward Sheriff Helm's house, which lay at the edge of town. In the grey light of the early dawn his blood-streaked face looked like a horrible mask.

The Crystal Palace shone with the only light in town. But Haver didn't pay a glance toward the saloon as he passed it. At his heels ran Pedro, his black cloak flying out behind him.

The only one in town to see them was a drunk who stepped to the batwing doors of the saloon and peered out. When one of Kegley's men asked him what the trouble was he walked back to the bar, shaking his head. He tossed down a quick drink.

"Funniest thing I ever seen," he mumbled. "I guess the whole town's drunk. A Mexican *padre* with a gun in his hand was chasin' a young gent down the street."

CHAPTER VI

Gun Justice

THE eastern sky was red by the time Haver and Pedro reached the last house along the street. Haver recognized Judy Helm's home. There was an unpainted picket fence about the place that came out and touched the dusty road.

Haver hesitated a moment at the gate. Gasping for breath, Pedro joined him but said nothing. Haver wondered why things swirled giddily in front of his eyes. His knees trembled, but the gun still dangled from his right hand.

Then like a man walking in a dream, he started toward the house. He didn't hurry. He stepped silently upon the porch and stood there listening. There was a front window close by, the blinds pulled low.

"Listen," whispered Pedro.

Voices came from within the house. One was a heavy, rumbling voice, raspy with anger. It drowned out what Judy Helm was saying.

"I'm holdin' yuh to yore promise, Judy! We'll be married down in the old mission in Mex town—"

Kegley was striving for a pleading note, trying to bridle his fury. Haver heard every word. Heard him as if he were miles off. Then Judy Helm's voice cut in.

"Yes, I promised to marry you! I did it to save my Father. I lied to him, told him I loved you. But he knows better. I hate you, Dice Kegley!" she cried furiously. "Hate you, hear me? Now get out!"

Then Dice Kegley was saying something about it'd be too bad for Judy Helm to see her father hang. That's what he'd do, he said. Tom Helm had killed a man over in Arizona once. They still wanted him. Then Judy Helm was sobbing.

Haver waited to hear no more. Without a sound he turned the door knob, stepped into the room. Like an image in a nightmare he saw Judy Helm, her horror-stricken face turned toward him as she stared over Kegley's shoulder.

In a dazed way, Haver saw everything. He heard Kegley's blubbering oath of amazement as he whirled. Judy Helm recoiled, one hand crushing her lips.

"I'm goin' to kill you, Kegley," said Haver, feverishly. "I said I would. Don't just stand there starin'. Go for yore gun!"

Judy Helm screamed again as two guns roared. Through a blur, Haver watched big Dice Kegley totter, then fall.

He was dead before he struck the floor. Haver didn't know how he had beat Kegley's blinding draw. All he knew was that his hand had lifted, the gun had bucked. Something had struck him in the left shoulder.

He lurched a step forward. His shoulder felt as if somebody had gouged him with a red hot poker and left it there. Judy reached his side. She and Pedro were guiding

him to a sofa. He felt better when they laid him down.

"Dal Haver," Judy cried, "you're hurt!"

"Shoulder hurts a little, that's all."

His own voice sounded peculiar to his ears and he hardly knew when Pedro and Judy tore back his flannel shirt and dressed his wound. He heard Pedro talking to the girl, then their voices faded.

Haver vaguely recalled the two people pouring hot liquid past his lips. When he opened his eyes again sunlight was streaming in through the windows. Judy Helm was sitting on the edge of the sofa beside him. She was pale as death. Her lips were quivering and tears dimmed the softness of her dark eyes.

"You've been asleep," she whispered.

"Kegley lied to you about yore father, Judy," Haver said evenly. "He's—"

"I know," Judy said bravely. "Pedro told me."

THEY fell silent. Pedro padded quietly into the room from the kitchen. He looked haggard, aged. He stopped near the sofa, canted his head. The dull clatter of horses' hoofs came to them from outside in the street. Riders were heading toward the center of town.

"Cowmen," Judy murmured bitterly. Then all her pent-up emotions broke in a whiplash of scorn. "Men who haven't the courage to be called men! Cowmen who have let—let Dice Kegley and his pack of killers run wild over the range. Kegley killed Johnny, and now my Father. Kegley is dead, but Freeman will continue. Those cowmen riding into town won't vote. They're afraid. Afraid that if they put a man up for sheriff and elect him they'll die."

Her ghostly, feverish words lingered in the silence of the room.

"*Dios,*" murmured Pedro.

He stood stiffly, a far-away look in his dark eyes. He seemed to be recalling the days when he had owned a large domain here in the valley. A domain which had been stolen from him by Dice Kegley.

Judy's words did something to Dal Haver. New strength seeped into his veins. Face pinched with pain, he rose to his feet. He ignored Judy's protesting cry. From a table near the door he picked up his gun. Then he was outside the house, half running, half stumbling out through the picket gate.

The two jumbled rows of buildings along the street swam crazily in front of his eyes. He tripped once, fell his full length in the dust. Then he ran on and on, his left arm hanging like a loose rope down at his side, a gun gripped in his right hand.

He hardly knew when he got to the center of town. He wouldn't have known it if it hadn't been for the people. The street itself was deserted. Men lined the plank walk across the street from the Crystal Palace Saloon, cowmen in high-heeled boots, with guns at their hips and hate in their hearts.

Opposite them in front of the saloon were lined Kegley's men. Hard-eyed men who savvied guns and bushwhack tricks but little about cows. Killers all. Men, like wolves, without their leader. Haver saw it all in a glance.

He was on the deadline—the center of the street. Over his head a huge banner with red letters said something about vote for Kegley for sheriff, and Kegley's men were here to see that it was done.

Those cowmen weren't cowards. All they needed was a leader. They stood waiting for someone to make the first move, then their guns would roar in rebellion against Kegley's yoke. The dust in the street would turn crimson.

Haver stopped, faced Kegley's group. No man in either group made a sound. No one moved. The silence fell like a ghastly prophesy of the death that was to follow. Head bandaged, eyes burning in his drawn face, Haver eyed the group. He saw Jake Freeman step out a pace. Freeman's face was a twisted mask.

"I come to vote, Freeman," Haver croaked.

"Vote?" bellowed Freeman. He

looked like a cornered coyote. "Damn right yuh can vote, jail-bait! But yuh'll vote for Kegley."

"Kegley's dead, Freeman."

"Dead?"

"An' I'm castin' the first vote in Hondo—for law an' order!"

Haver's gun blasted as he pitched forward into the dusty street. Freeman, his gun falling from stiffening fingers, rose on his toes and dropped. Gun flames were already licking out from both sides of the street. Men were falling—mostly Kegley's clan. Cowmen, surging out into the street, were drunk with a new courage that had been given them.

DOWN in the dust, Haver choked. That pitch forward had saved his life.

A leaden hail passed over his head. He thumbed the hammer of his gun until it bucked no more. He threw it at Kegley's killers who were backing into the saloon, yelling for mercy.

Then the din that beat into Haver's ears seemed to rob him again of consciousness.

The fight didn't last long that day in Hondo town. In spots the dust turned to crimson, but Kegley and his henchmen were dead, their power broken forever. The cowmen had paid a price. It was the price of freedom and peace for the entire valley.

Dal Haver opened his eyes to find himself lying on the sofa in the front room of Judy Helm's house, where the picket fence reached out and touched the dust of the road. In the room with him were Judy, Pedro and a nervous-fingered little man who wore glasses and said he was the doctor.

The medico told Haver to be quiet and he was. Haver listened to the doc tell him about all that had happened. But he didn't look much at the doctor. Mostly he kept watching Judy Helm who stood close to him.

"I've heard of lucky gents but yuh're the luckiest," said the doctor.

"I guess I am," said Haver weakly, and he grinned up at Judy who smiled back through her tears.

"You'll be all right in a few days with the right kind of nursin'," said the doctor.

"He'll get it," said Judy Helm.

Then the doctor left. He went out and closed the front door behind him. He was a gruff little man with kindly eyes who knew when his job was done.

Pedro was different. Some of the stark tragedy had lifted from his eyes. He just stood beside the sofa, watching Judy Helm move up to Haver's side and kneel. The late afternoon shadows spread out across the room.

For the first time Haver was aware of guarded voices outside. Out there in the yard he could hear men moving about, talking.

"What's that?" he asked of Judy.

Judy Helm smiled. "I think every rancher in Hondo Valley is out there tromping down my flowers in the front yard. They want to see you, and thank you, Dal. They want you to accept the job of sheriff."

"That can wait, Judy," said Haver slowly. "I'm wonderin' about something else right now. I know you've got a scar over your heart that'll take a long time to heal. I'll—I'll never forget Johnny, either." He fumbled for words. He was suddenly finding it hard to say what he wanted to. "But I was wonderin' if mebbe—in time—"

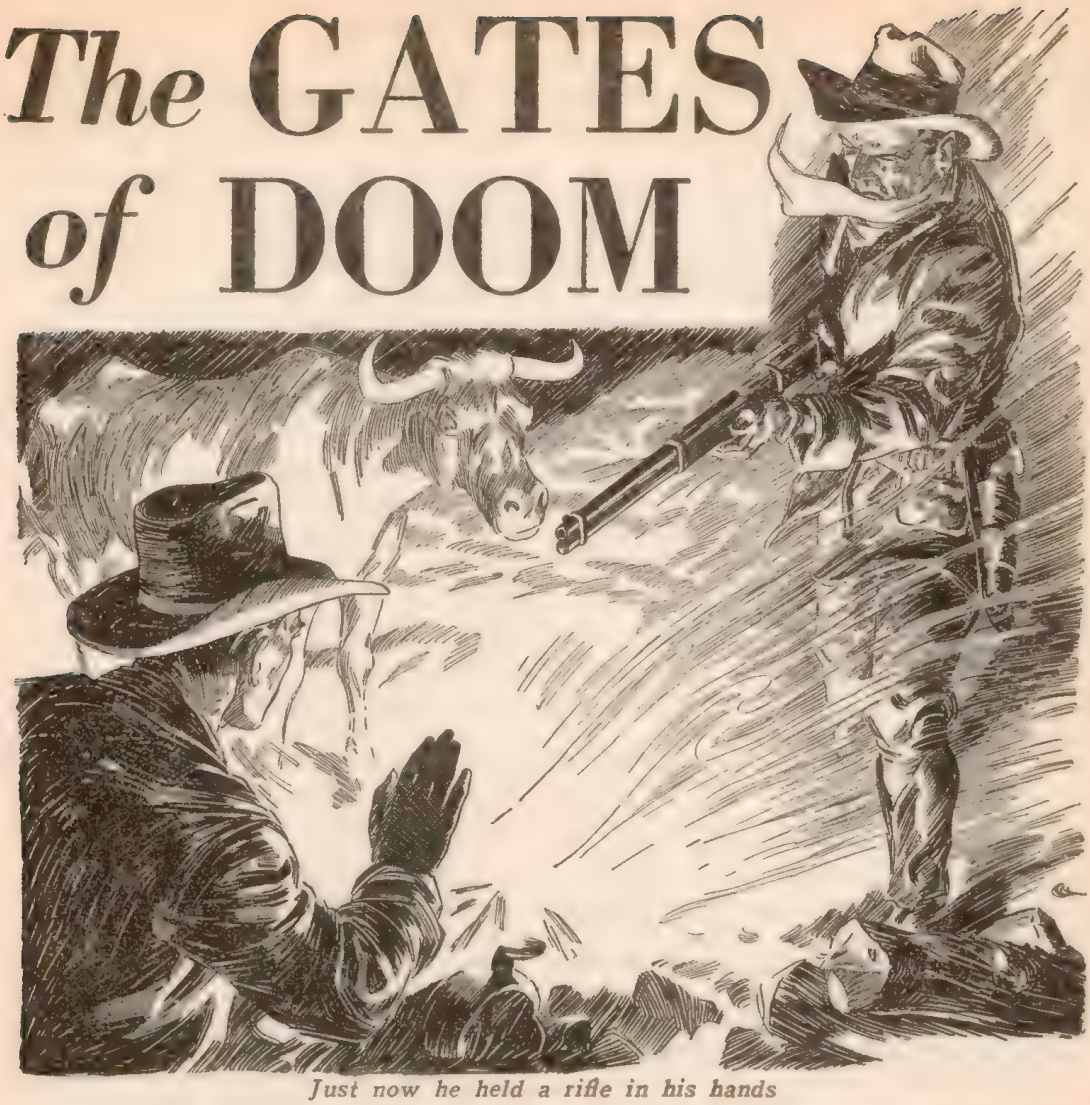
"I KNOW what you mean, Dal," said Judy, her lips quivering. "I am still dazed over what has happened." She looked down at the tiny handkerchief in her hands. Finally when she looked up she was smiling bravely. "But I think you're wonderful, Dal," she murmured simply, "and time can do wonders."

Haver felt the surge of hope, of a joy he had never known before. Maybe it was because he read a lot of things in Judy Helm's misted eyes that words couldn't express. He looked up at Pedro.

"Tell those cowmen out there, Pedro," he said, "I'll take that job of sheriff, if their offer still holds."

And that is what Pedro told them, that day in Hondo town.

The GATES *of* DOOM



Just now he held a rifle in his hands

Bigfoot Encounters Human and Animal Enemies in His Fight for Existence!

By ARCHIE JOSCELYN

Author of "Flaming Fodder," "Mask of Doom," etc.

HE was named Bigfoot, which, had he but known it, was a mark of distinction from the beginning. For few calves, or, for the matter of that, grown cattle as well, ever attained to the dignity of a name. They were of the herd, sharing a common life and a common destiny.

"There's a late calf," Trip Hanihan had observed one day in midsummer, pointing to where Bigfoot frisked with several others of his ilk. "Come too late to ever stand the winter. Nothin' but head and bones and big feet. Have to veal him, come fall, or he'll be coyote bait—when it turns cold."

Bert Madden had swung a little in the saddle, easy as flowing grease. He was a big man, slow-moving, slow-spoken, and he gave the impression of being slow-thinking as well—which was far from the mark,

as more than one man had discovered to his chagrin.

"Pore little feller," he observed. "Has got big feet, ain't he? Same as me. Looks like it'd tire them spindle shanks uh his plumb out to pack 'em around. Ef'n he'd ever grow up to them feet, he'd be a whopper. Lil' tike needs his face washed, too."

HANIHAN grinned. Bigfoot was apart from the common herd, no doubt of that. Where most of them were red steers with white faces, he started in according to pattern but ended surprisingly with just enough black hair clouding his face to give him an unwashed, comical look.

Now, essaying a sudden flying start in a game of chase and dodge with the other calves, he stumbled over his own bunched feet, fell sprawling, and struggled up again with rather an abashed look.

"Pore little feller," Madden repeated. "He's like me, all thumbs and no fingers. Got plenty spirit, though. Figgers whatever the rest can do, he can make a try at."

"Plenty spirit, maybe, but not much else—except feet," Hanihan said dryly. "He'll have to be vealed, or a coyote'll make a meal off him, come winter."

"Guess yuh're right." Madden's eyes still followed the calf, as the two men rode on. "Makes me feel kinda sorry for him, at that. Sort of a feller feelin', I guess. Both of us tuh have the Injun sign on us, and nothin' we can do about it."

His employer swung on him impatiently.

"Sometimes you make me doggoned tired, Bert," he protested. "It's been six months since yuh heard a word about Flood—and when it comes to that, yuh ain't no slouch with guns yoreself."

Madden wagged his big head soberly.

"Yeah, it's been more'n half a year since Flood broke out of the pen," he agreed. "But it's his way to wait. He's a plumb patient cuss, like a puma crouchin' on a limb, waitin' for a deer tuh wander under. But I know good'n well he still aims to kill me, like he promised he would.

"And he'll do it, too, one of these days. Like yuh say, I'm fair to middlin' good with a gun, but that don't help none against a snake that strikes before he rattles. Like I say, gives me kind of a feller feelin' for that pore little tike of a calf. Tough tuh have the Injun sign on yuh, and not be able to do nothin' about it."

Blissfully unaware of the shadow hanging over his dirty face, Bigfoot was making the most of the summer days. Smaller than the others of his herd and generation to begin with, due to a two-months head start which the rest averaged over him, he was forging ahead faster than most of the other calves in every essential but one—where they were round and sleek, he merely seemed to grow bones and framework, leaving scant meat to cover the whole.

By early fall he was nearly as big as the others, but so gaunt that the contrast was startling. Yet by now one thing was noticeable. He was as tireless as the best of them, and a fleeter runner could not be found in the entire herd.

Already he had learned the lesson of the weak—that the strong would tolerate him only so long as it amused them to do so, but that when it came to a choice of grass, or the first drink in a too-crowded pool, they were ever ready to shoulder him away and take it all.

In such a case, if brute strength was on the other side, strategy was required. If you were smaller than some of the others, you could slip between their legs to reach the water. Speed was often the key to a prize, and the ability to dodge a necessary accomplishment. There were stratagems and wiles for obtaining what would otherwise be denied you, and Bert Madden, easily keeping an eye on Bigfoot because of his dirty face, occasionally chuckled delightedly.

"That durned little tike, he's got brains," he exclaimed. "Know what

he did, Trip? Reckon he's lost his ma for a spell, and it bein' right hot, I guess he was gettin' even thirstier than the rest of the herd. And there was thirty-forty of 'em crowdin' up fin'ly to that little spring by the rocks, late in the afternoon—yuh know some critters will stay away from water till they are half choked, just 'cause they're too lazy to start for it.

"Well, the whole bunch of 'em tried to crowd in and get a drink when they did come. Three-four other calves, they couldn't get to the water, but their mas was there, so they had dinner anyway. Bigfoot, he tried half a dozen times to get to the spring, and they'd keep hookin' him away. Looked like it'd be most an hour 'fore they'd quit guzzlin' and move tuh let him near it, and his tongue was fair hangin' out."

Madden wiped his own face with a blue bandanna, his grin spreading.

"Well, sir, that danged little tike stood an' watched a minute, after they'd hooked him back so much, and he seemed to size up the situation. Yuh could fair see him puzzlin' it out. Then I seen him do a sneak off a couple hundred feet, over that knoll to the south. None of the rest uh the herd was payin' any attention tuh him.

"Then, after a minute, I heard a blat, like when a wolf jumps at a calf, say. Then another. At first, every critter pricked up their ears, and at the second, they started that way on the run. Call for help, uh course."

Madden restored the handkerchief to a pocket, fumbled with a well-gnawed plug of brown tobacco.

"Next thing, I sees this Bigfoot calf come amblin' around the edge uh the knoll, like he was out for a stroll. Innocent seemin' as yuh please. Then he made a bee-line for that spring. And time the others got around tuh come back, kind of wonderin' what it was all about, he'd had a right satisfyin' guzzle of his own. Yes, sir, that calf's smart."

"Kind of sharp practice, I'd say," Hanihan yawned. "Anyway, brains is all he has got. No beef. Have to be vealed."

With the fall, gradual change was coming over Bigfoot. He was still big and gaunt and ragged looking for his size, but his hair was longer, thicker. His horns, now an inch through his skin, were becoming more pointed and hardened, and his agility, despite his apparent clumsiness, was a thing to wonder at.

Adversity was proving a competent teacher, even if a harsh one. And with the advent of crisp Fall days, the air winey and sparkling, the grass cured to a satisfying flavor and heartiness, Bigfoot found life a pleasant experience.

Long days under a still-warm sun, long warm nights under purple skies and far white stars, a lazy, effortless existence, with a newly-discovered cud to chew upon and a big-boned mother to nuzzle one over affectionately and come home to—it was too good to last, but Bigfoot hadn't found that out yet.

THE awakening came with rude abruptness. From the beginning of his short span of existence, Bigfoot had been accustomed to seeing occasional riders on horseback pass among the grazing herd, or coming now and again with a buckboard and sacks of salt to scatter in convenient piles. But these riders had been like the hawks that circled overhead, the woodchucks that sunned themselves on rocks and occasionally barked a shrill protest against some grievance, real or fancied.

Or, like the antelope which now and again drifted near the grazing cattle herd, only to scamper away like startled clumps of thistledown before a sudden gust of wind. Cockleburrs on the hide of existence, sometimes a mild annoyance, sometimes faintly interesting, but nothing to worry about.

Overnight all this was changed. Riders appeared in gathering swarms like the blackbirds, the meadow larks and all the other numerous feathered inhabitants of the hills and prairies. They had been content to go it alone or in pairs for

the summer, but now seemed impelled to dash madly and joyously about in vast and slightly irrational appearing groups. Like them, riders were coming in bunches instead of ones and twos.

A CHUCK wagon, with new white canvas showing far against the brown earth, rolled out from the ranchhouse. The riders dashed here and there from dawn to dark, always bothering the hitherto peaceful herd, throwing it almost instantly into confusion and uproar.

From dawn to dark now and from dark to sunrise there was frenzied bawling, the blatting of lost or distressed calves, the querulous answers of their mothers, with the steers joining in, partly from rage and excitement, partly as though sensing that, for many of them at least, this roundup marked the beginning of the end.

To Bigfoot, it was all vastly confusing and distressing. Gone as abruptly as a bunch of cropped grass was the carefree life he had come to expect as a matter of course. Throughout the first two days and nights he skirted the edge of the disturbance, clinging close to his mother's flanks, making more than one victorious dash for freedom when the ever-closing lines of riders seemed about to catch them in the big dragnet.

On the third day, in the midst of ever increasing confusion, Bigfoot lost his mother. Throughout the rest of that day and night and a good part of the next, he searched for her, at first eagerly, then frantically. The one place where he might have found her, however, among the stock already rounded up, he refused to go. Several times, by his fleetness and cunning, he averted efforts to herd him along to where smoke of branding fires and scorching skin and hair odor rose pungently on the still air. There dire bawlings of rage and pain attested that something horrible was happening to those of his clan who were so unfortunate as to be caught in the roundup.

His mother might be there, but Bigfoot had no way of knowing. His every instinct was for freedom, and escape. So well did he exercise it that when, after a week of combing the hills and coulees, the roundup ended, Bigfoot still roamed free and unblemished by any brand.

By that time he was a little more gaunt, if such were possible, than he had been before. But most of his first anxiety for his mother had worn away. There was plenty of water to drink, and while it was not as satisfying as milk, it served the purpose. And there was succulent, well-cured grass in plenty, and he consumed a lot of it.

After the roundup was over, many of the former herd began, for a time, to drift back to their old haunts again. Other calves with whom Bigfoot had romped now bore big X C marks on their left sides, but these were already well on the road to healing and were accepted with a vast indifference. Some cows were returning, but Bigfoot's mother was not among them. And there were many steers—yearlings and two- and three-years-olds. But the bigger patriarchs of the herd, who had demanded the best of everything in a lordly way and had gotten it, were missing. They had lived on the fat of the land, that the fat of the land might now live on them.

Again the riders returned in ones and twos, passing quietly and unobtrusively among the herd, and though still eyeing them warily, Bigfoot lost his distrust for them so long as they kept their distance. He was careful, however, not to let them approach too close, for once when that had happened, a rope had flipped across an intervening space which, because of a small but deep canyon intervening, Bigfoot had considered safe.

The noose settled around his neck, drawing chokingly tight for one agonizing instant. Bigfoot had bawled and plunged headlong the other way, leaping recklessly over a fifteen-foot bank below. He had escaped a broken neck only because

big Bert Madden had swiftly let go of the rope.

After a few minutes, unhurt by his jump, Bigfoot had worked his head out of the noose, and the cowboy had retrieved it a little later, grinning to himself. Trip Hanihan, told of the occurrence, had shaken his head.

"Why the blazes didn't yuh keep him, Bert? What if he did break his neck? Yuh know we've got to veal him pretty soon, to keep the coyotes from getting him, even if we have tuh shoot him half a mile off with a rifle. Yuh're too tenderhearted for belief."

MADDEN shook his head.

"Reckon yuh're right, Trip," he conceded. "But the doggoned little tike has got such spirit—I never saw a calf know so much and all. And I couldn't let him snap his neck, makin' a bold play like that for freedom. When yuh've sort of got your own neck in the noose, it gives you kind of a feller feelin'."

"Still thinking about Flood, eh? Heck, man, it's near a year since he got out of the pen. He thinks too much of his own neck to try and settle an old grudge against the only man ever was able tuh hunt him down and turn him over to the law."

"He'll be showin' up, one of these days," Madden said with quiet positiveness. "Comin' when I don't expect him, strikin' without givin' me a chance—I know that killer. These are just days of grace for me, same as they are for Bigfoot."

Life has unexpected ways of dealing, as Bigfoot was discovering more and more. The great flocks of birds which had made the air a joyous riot of color and song for a short time, had disappeared. Leaves on the trees, golden yellow and ripely brown or bloodily crimson, had mostly fallen. And then, one morning, having slept warmly in a rather sheltered spot, Bigfoot opened his eyes to stare in amazement on a world grown fantastic overnight.

Snow lay everywhere, already nearly a foot deep, and the air was choked with it, so that he could not see more than ten lengths in any direction. The air was still warm, but nothing looked familiar or natural, and for the first time in his experience, he could see no landmarks, no others of the herd, nothing but this strange stuff. When he tried to get a bite of grass, it was almost impossible to find any of it.

Bigfoot was puzzled, and, by midday, decidedly hungry. He was shivering as well, for the air was growing sharply colder, though the big flakes had turned to smaller ones, flinty particles which stung his nose and burned his eyes.

Throughout the morning he had wandered, nervous and undecided, with growing hunger and steadily mounting uneasiness in this strange new world, trying to find others of the herd, now and then bawling disconsolately, utterly alone in an unfriendly world.

Not quite alone. One of his bawls had been answered in a way he hadn't liked. He had heard, not far off in the storm, the howl of a coyote, and there was a new note in it, which had been absent when he had heard it raised to a golden moon on summer nights. This was the hunting howl, and instinctively his ears recognized it.

A minute later he saw the skulker, a grey shadow in the storm, not twenty feet away. The biggest coyote that he had ever seen, eyeing him speculatively.

The coyote was a little below where Bigfoot stood, and Bigfoot tried, in sudden panic, to turn and run. He moved with his accustomed swiftness, being able, as Bert Madden had once expressed it, to turn on a dime and leave a nickel for change.

But this time something happened which he had not counted on. The grass beneath his feet was covered with snow, and he slipped, slid straight toward the coyote.

Big his feet might be, but the calf had learned through necessity how to control them. This time the slippery footing had surprised him, but by the time he had covered half the distance he had gathered them under

him again and was upon them. He was still heading toward the coyote, however, hurried on by his own momentum.

With a shrill blat of mingled rage and terror, Bigfoot accepted the inevitable, and, making no further effort to turn, hurled himself forward, head lowered, little pointed horns set and ready.

Surprised by this utterly unexpected act, the big coyote gave a leap to safety—but his smug assurance that full control of the situation rested with him was upset as one of the horns prodded him painfully, almost overbearing him.

BIGFOOT paused, snorting, looking around for his adversary. The coyote had been more than half inclined to make a meal of him, but that unexpected defiance and the vicious attack of the calf, which he had deemed utterly helpless, had shaken his confidence. There was plenty of other food to be had for the taking, without risk. Now Bigfoot found that the coyote had vanished in the storm.

The encounter gave him a vast new confidence in his own prowess. Half an hour later, he discovered one of the antelope herd, smaller than himself, calmly pawing away the snow on a slope where it was not so deep, and where the grass was rich and luxuriant, then making a meal of it.

Bigfoot watched, approached curiously, driven by hunger. He nibbled where the antelope had been at work, clumsily essayed the same trick himself, and found it to work. Entirely ignorant of the proximity of Bert Madden, he was none the less reported on that evening.

"Smart little tike, like I told yuh," Madden chuckled. "Think of a calf like him pawin' the snow away, like a horse does, and gettin' his belly full. Most grown critters never learned that trick."

"Well, some grown folks never learn not to be soft-headed when they're soft-hearted," Hanihan growled. "Here yuh had another good chance to bring him in, and we're needin' meat, too. Calf may be smart, but he'll sure be coyote bait pretty soon if we don't get him, and starved so thin he won't even do for veal."

"Me, I still like bacon," Madden chuckled. "And I'm strong for Bigfoot. Mebbe he's got the hex sign on him, same as me, but he's sure puttin' up a fight till his time does come."

The first storm passed, followed by a thaw, and for a few days Bigfoot found life easy again. But this Indian summer was of short duration, like a mocking glimpse of paradise shown by a lifting curtain, almost at hand, seeming readily attainable, then shut away by the dropping of the curtain again.

Winter swept back with redoubled fury, storm following storm in swift succession. The mercury tumbled until it seemed that it must break its back and would certainly break the back of all living things if this was an earnest sign of what was yet to come, with November hardly well along now.

Most of the cattle had moved lower down, back toward the main ranch buildings of the X C, the older ones knowing from experience that hay was obtainable there and the living far easier. There were others, some inexperienced like Bigfoot, some dumb fool critters which never learned anything anyway, as Hanihan expressed it, which did not go of their own accord.

Because of these scattered through the hills, big Bert Madden set out, with bed-roll and supplies, to hunt them up and haze them toward a better living. With the snow growing deep and tracking easy, it wasn't so much trouble to find and persuade them, one or two or three at a time, to go.

Two or three times, in the next few days, he came across a track which he recognized. Bigfoot was still living up to his early promise, his feet were still the biggest of any calf of his size. There were, of course, older cattle which made a similar track, but, as Madden chuckled, the others with feet that big had

legs long enough that their belly didn't drag in the snow every now and then.

Bigfoot was finding life increasingly hard, even as were the predatory animals. The rabbits seemed suddenly to have disappeared, and coyote food wasn't easy to find. Bigfoot had the uneasy knowledge that he was becoming an object of speculation, but so far he had eaten more or less regularly and had avoided all enemies. If it wasn't for the pinching cold, which seemed to turn his backbone to almost fluid ice, and to strike from his skin on one side, straight through his lean body to the other side, he would still be all right.

ONE discovery he made. He had stood behind a litle rise one morning and watched, rather wistfully, while Bert Madden cooked and ate breakfast, then rode off in the opposite direction. Then he had ambled up to the deserted camp, where the cooking fire still burned a little.

Bigfoot smelled curiously around, and discovered that the blaze was warm. Standing near it, it seemed for a few blissful minutes as though the sun was warming him again on one of those all but forgotten summer days. The chill was driven from his body, and he sensed that it was from the fire that the heat came. Fire was a thing feared by most creatures, but it seemed to have its place.

Also, it had melted some of the snow for a few feet around, and he made a satisfying breakfast. The sun did come out, with a measure of warmth, and Bigfoot, from a vantage point of a small butte—he had formed the habit of frequently climbing to a high point to survey his domain and guard against surprise—watched Madden during several hours of that weary day.

Though the cowboy had no inkling that the orphaned calf was close at hand, Bigfoot saw where he made camp again that night, a couple of miles from his camp of the night before. The fire was built against a big rocky ledge which would reflect the heat cheerfully. As Madden fried bacon, the lonesome calf watched him wistfully from the descending gloom, a hundred yards away.

Though neither of them had any inkling of it, the gates of doom which had yawned before their hapless heads throughout the months, seemed now about to open and engulf them at last. Bigfoot was the first to become aware of stalking peril, when a breeze brought to his nostrils the whiff of coyote.

Tonight, the big grey ghost was hunting warily and determinedly, making no outcry. A veteran of nearly ten years, the biggest coyote in the whole X C range, he had learned wisdom at the cost of missing meals, and tonight he was hungry.

He intended to kill this calf, and the mere fact that it was lurking close to a campfire where a man cooked his supper was not sufficient deterrent to matter. The coyote knew how to work it. A swift slash to the throat would be enough, but if that proved difficult, he knew as well as any wolf, how to hamstring his victim and then make a meal at his leisure. Tonight he was fully confident. His former rout by this calf was not worth a second thought. He hadn't been really hungry *then*.

Killer scent was strong as it reached Bigfoot's nostrils, and the calf had learned to recognize it. Here was tangible menace, not an odd adventure of a series. He knew by instinct that he would be no match against the coyote in such a contest, even if he had defeated him once. Bigfoot knew, as well as his adversary, that this was a different occasion now.

The calf did not hesitate. If it was a choice between two perils, he knew which was the lesser. Turning, he trotted swiftly toward the campfire.

Big Bert Madden looked up in surprise as the calf trotted into the circle of firelight, but he did not make the mistake of moving or

speaking. He merely stood and watched.

Bigfoot approached closer, from the side. Then he stopped, seemingly unafraid. From the deepening gloom beyond, came a disgusted snarling growl. Madden grinned understandingly.

"Coyote, and it aimed to make a meal of Bigfoot," he muttered. "And even if yore face is dirty, yuh danged little tike, yuh knew how to fool him—and he knows he's fooled. Didn't count on yuh havin' that many brains. Sure ain't another critter like yuh on this whole range."

STILL grinning, Madden turned, checked suddenly. His big body seemed to stiffen, something like dismay crept for an instant into his eyes. His hand, which had half-started toward the holstered gun at his hip, checked the movement, and slowly he raised his hands.

Ten paces away, just at the edge of the circle of firelight, stood the outlaw, Flood. He was a big man, yet utterly incongruous. Big, long arms, wide, powerful shoulders, a heavy trunk, all set on legs far too short, he had the look of a gorilla, which was enhanced by his face—small, close-set ears, a broad, flat nose and wide, snarling mouth. Just now he held a rifle in his hands, the muzzle bearing on the cowboy's heart, hammer drawn back, finger caressing the trigger.

For a moment the silent tableau held. Then Flood took a slow step closer.

"That's showin' sense, Madden," he chuckled throatily. "I see yuh remember me, all right. And I remember yuh, too. Promised yuh, when yuh hunted me down and got the drop on me, an' took me to the law, that there wasn't no jail could hold me long. Promised yuh that I'd get out, and that when I did, I'd come and look yuh up ag'in, didn't I? And that I'd kill yuh, didn't I? Promised yuh that."

"Yes, yuh said yuh'd do all that," Madden agreed. His voice was soft, but it held a dry, almost choked quality now. He was looking at death, and he knew it—death as inexorable and remorseless as that of a rattlesnake. This man had four brutal killings to his discredit already, and he killed with as little compunction as most men would shoot the head from a rattler.

"I reckon yuh've been expectin' me," the killer gloated. "Been figgerin', for months now, that I'd catch up with yuh, one of these days. Yuh knew that I always keep my promises, that way. Well, I wasn't in no hurry—I figgered I might as well give yuh plenty time to enjoy expectin' me. But I'm here now—and tonight—you die."

He took another slow step closer. He was like a cat, playing with its victim, absolutely sure that it had no chance. For he was a man who took no chances, gave his victims no shadow of a break. At the least false move on Madden's part, that thick finger would press the trigger, and it would be ended. It wouldn't be long in any case.

"Yeah, yuh been expectin' me, all right," Flood went on gloatingly, drawing another slow pace nearer his victim, as though, like a snake, he would charm him by proving his impotency to stir. "Yuh been thinkin' about me, knowin' I'd get yuh when I got ready. And I sure have yuh now. In about two minutes, yuh'll be kickin' there in the snow."

One more slow step. His eyes were steady on the cowboy, never wavering for even an instant. He knew Madden for a dangerous adversary, given half a chance—but he didn't intend to give him even half a chance.

"Four years I spent behind the bars—penned up like a hog. Four years uh hell—but yuh're payin' tonight, hombre, don't forget it none. Yuh're payin—now!"

Another slow step. Finger trembling on the trigger—killer light flaming high in his eyes.

The outlaw had noticed Bigfoot out of the corner of his eye, but he had given no thought to the calf. A calf was only a calf, and had nothing to do with his calculations. Bigfoot, however, had given thought to

this intruder, thought which swiftly grew uneasy.

Since his excursion to Bert Madden's campfire that morning, being warmed by it and fed by the grass which its heat had uncovered, the calf had lost much of his fear of this one man. But for others he still entertained his own dislike and distrust. And now the outlaw, approaching at an angle, had all unwittingly trapped Bigfoot.

Bert Madden might be all right, so long as Bigfoot retained his own freedom of action. If it came to captivity, that was something else again. And now the cowboy stood on one corner, the fire and ledge was behind Bigfoot, and, advancing gradually from the other point of the triangle, the outlaw was slowly closing the gap, hemming Bigfoot in —clearly, it seemed to the calf, with the intention of making him a prisoner.

For a few seconds he watched, unmoving, though his eyes were darting nervously about. The trap was closing, and this newcomer was closing it. On him, therefore, Bigfoot centered his attention and his resentment. As it became increasingly apparent that he was being penned in, the moment when Flood's finger fluttered on the trigger, the calf took action.

With a shrill bawl of rage and terror, it leaped for freedom. Bigfoot's intention was to dodge past Flood, but its bawl startled the outlaw, and he swung his gaze hastily just in time to see it hurtling toward him. Swiftly he tried to leap aside, succeeding instead in getting directly in Bigfoot's path.

Bigfoot was not one, once started on a course, to swerve. His experience with the coyote had taught him to charge and charge hard if there was trouble ahead. Now he swept between the short, barrel-like legs of the outlaw, upsetting him neatly, plunged on—into the welcoming gloom beyond.

Bert Madden had not hoped for a chance, but he was ready when it came. One jump, and he was on top

(Concluded on page 129)

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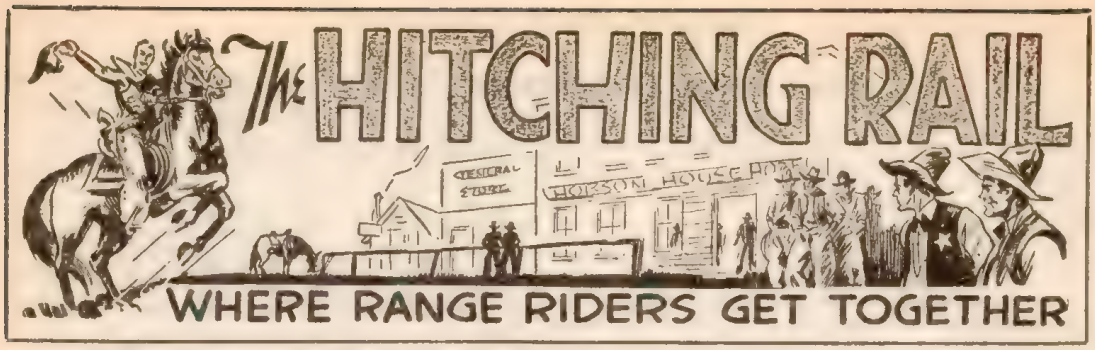

HOLA, ev'rybody! Onct ag'in yere we're leanin' over this ol' Hitchin' Rail an' clawin' one another's paws like all th' world war our'n, an' our hearts glad at seein' so many new faces among th' members of our RANGE RIDERS' CLUB.

Memberships has shore been lopin' in mucho since we rounded-up beside this old rail last time. Yes, suh, shore's seen many a fella an' gal sendin' in their coupons, signed, sealed, an' delivered right yere at my desk.

An' any hombre or rannie-gal what does that, enclosin' a stamped an' self-addressed envelope, will git his or her membership cyard pronto, plumb free, an' be able tuh write us or squat 'round our Hitchin' Rail all they durned likes, gittin' th' glad hand from us all. We shore likes a happy crowd, any ol' time. Allers suthin' doin' sech times.

We Dolled Up Plenty

Reminds me time Beaver Dick, Jess Taylor, Joe Nelson an' a bunch uv us bronc-straddlers from down our Arizony way figgered to doll up in our best bibs an' tuckers, which same means, with us cowboys, fancy shirts, calf-skin vests (hair wore on th' outside, brown an' white an' swell), our best batwings, our new Stetsons cocked over one eye proper, big spurs on our hand-carved ridin' boots an' our neckerchiefs proclaimin' all th' colors ever seen in one o' them solar spectrum things Miss Blondie, our boss's secretary yere, done read us about coupla weeks ago, her bein' eddicated proper and kind tuh us cowfolks.

She told me them colors was what she called VIBGYOR, ef yuh kin pronounce that sorta lingo, but she tol' us ef we'd cut out each letter an' make a guess what color it meant, we'd savvy that spelled violet, indigo, blue, grey, yeller, orange, an' red.

Well, fellas an' gals, that's jest th' way our fancy neckerchiefs looked as we rid intuh Sawtooth that payday an' took in th' sights. We shore looked like a bunch o' Billy Connell's dudes from his fancy Star-X Guest Ranch, as he was callin' his durned ol' Box-4 tuh attract attention o' easterners—an' their pockit books.

Proud As All Git Out

We war shore uh eyeful, individual an' collective. Reckon yuh kin all vision th' picture of us waddies rompin' down Sawtooth's one an' only highway. An' war we all proud as all git out, an' did we sit straight up, smilin' as we met th' gaze o' th' populace, what had gathered tuh see th' cirkus what war in town that day? Jest ask me, pals.

An' each o' us was luggin' 'most ten good round simoleons in our jeans, th' boss havin' made us each uh advance so's we could shine in town an' prove tuh one an' all that he had th' finest bunch o' bronc-hoppers th' range had ever saw.

A Swell Cirkus Band

Yes, suh, us fellas shore loved crowds, an' Sawtooth had plenty that day, with th' cirkus an' all. Growed-ups an' kids, waggins, an' hitch-racks lined with saddled cow-hosses, flags aflyin' ev'rywheres, boardwalks singin' th' song o' high-heels an' dainty feminine footgear, fancy folks all 'round, th' cirkus band a-playin' like it war afeared tuh stop fer fear some locoed cowgent'd git bustin' lead at 'em ef they did.

In front o' Jake Ramsey's Sky Blue Bar, we unforked our nags, tossed our reins over th' rack an' went inside tuh git th' dust outa our throats.

Th' thirty miles in from th' ranch had been right dry an' dusty 'count no rain havin' fell fer 'most four months. While we war lickerin' up an' jest startin' tuh feel human ag'in, in romps a tall, lanky fella wearin' a high hat an' a long, black coat an' fancy city ridin' boots. He blowed aside his wavy black mustache, shoved down big black eyebrows an' studied us solemn like fer 'most half a minute; then, without us sayin' a danged word, he nods like he war satisfied an' marches up before us an' stiffens like he war a town constable an' opens up on us as ef he war gonna do a Congressman's address tuh his fella citizens jest afore 'lection time.

Th' Grand "Ontray"

"Boys," he orates, jest like he'd knowed us from childhood, "I'm yere tuh make yuh an offer—five bucks apiece tuh head our Grand Entree (he called it "Ontray"). We opens th' show at 2 P. M. an' I'm th' owner an' ringmaster. I jest wants yuh tuh ride 'round in th' arena, ahaid o' th' rest o' us folks, wavin' yore hats, givin' cowboy yells, one behind th' other, an' then ride on out through th' end openin' of our big tent; an' I'll pay yuh off right

then an' there, in spot cash. Yuh all look fine tuh me an'll be a sensation."

While us cow waddies was used tuh dollin' up when ridin' tuh a baile at some ranch or when visitin' Sawtooth tuh see th' new biscuit shooters what Billy Connell allers brings in when his dude ranch season opens up, it didn't strike our crowd as dignified tuh head no cirkus show.

They's limits tuh what range riders'll do. Self-respect demands restraint. But we drained our glasses in silence, squintin' at each other solemn, thinkin' hard. Five dollars apiece! An' ahead o' us was th' cirkus tickits, th' faro an' monte an' poker an' chuck-a-luck an' stud an' th' merry-go-rounds an' mebbe a sideshow or two, all costin' spot cash what must be laid in th' barkers' hands afore we could discover America at play.

An' ef we each was lucky 'nough tuh git one o' Billy Connell's new waitresses tuh lug intuh th' show with us an' treat 'em tuh popcorn an' soft drinks, that'd take more dinero.

Us fellas knowed it war a good offer an' a time tuh use calm judgment an' let our dignity keep asleepin' awhile. We looks at one another an' takes another drink. Then Jess Taylor nods tuh me his consent, an' th' rest does likewise, leavin' me tuh make answer tuh th' tall hat hombre. I savvies th' delicacy of our situation—dignity ag'in a bad-needed extra five simo-

(Continued on page 124)

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(Continued from page 123)

leons, an' we all shore wanted tuh make th' day happy fer ev'rybody.

Raisin' th' Ante

"Sir," I orates without givin' way our need of five extra bucks, "make it ten apiece an' we're your'n, body an' soul."

"But they're 'most ten o' yuh," he comes back quick. "I can't afford—"

Me, Buck Benson, allers has a ready answer, an' a sorta wave o' my hand what speaks decision. Yes, suh, a stern eye, a stiffenin' o' th' shoulders an' that wave o' th' hand—it gits places.

"No less," I retorts, "but tell yuh what we'll do. I'll take Jess yere, an' Joe Nelson, Beaver Dick, myself an' Dude Chaney yere an' us five'll ride ahaid fer ten bucks apiece. Our other five boys'll ride behind us fer the five apiece yuh offers. It's our final answer, suh, tuh yore offer."

I turns back tuh th' bar, ketchin' scowls from th' five what I'd offered at that half price, but I give 'em th' wink an' we all lined up fer one more li'l drink o' ol' Jake's rattler p'ison.

That done th' trick. Tall Hat orated acceptance. We nods agreement. He leads us outside an' has us mount our broncs, then we're led inside th' big show tent an' told jest what tuh do.

Some Real Purty Girls

That tent war shore packed an' we knowed 'most ev'rybody; an' sittin' right down clost tuh th' ring in reserved seats war Billy Connell hisself, host tuh half a dozen o' th' purtiest gals yuh ever seen —th' first bunch o' th' gals what he war bringin' in fer work on his dude ranch. Say, folks, was them gals rambunctious tuh a fella's eyes?

Us cowpokes eyes 'em hard, smilin' at each, mentally pickin' out th' one he'd ask tuh be his guest come supper time in th' hotel. We rides straight up in our kaks as we goes past them beauties, doin' our best tuh attract their attention an' let 'em make their choices among us—like gals allers does, times like that. They'd been cirkuses in Sawtooth before, an' we'd l'arned.

Yowlin' Wild

Then comes that Grand Entree, bands an' all, elephants, riders in fancy tights an' big, plumy headgears; clowns, an' zebras rode by monkeys; strong men an' trapese artists in spangles. It war a right swell assortment, that cirkus, an' we rode in th' lead like "Warriors o' th' Wild," yowlin' wild and' wavin' our Stetsons like we'd been told.

But in a cirkus things moves fast. Afore we war halfway round that ring, trapeze prformers war climbin' up tuh their trapeses, elephants war dancin' in th' inner circles an' ev'rybody war hot busy. That sorta peeved Beaver Dick, him noticin' th' audience war no longer admirin' us cowpokes.

By that time, we'd reached th' exit, rode outside an' there war th' owner. He handed each o' us our cash money and says we're free tuh sit in bleacher seats an' watch th' show. But I seen them drinks in Jake's had got under Beaver Dick's skin an' he war feelin' that peeve. Suddenly he whirled his pinto back to'ards th' openin' an' yawps at us fellas hostile.

"Let's go back an' give th' folks their money's worth, boys," he yips. "Cirkus only comes yere onct a year."

Peppin' Up th' Show

Next we knowd, we war back ridin' 'round that ring ag'in, a-yoopin' an' a-hollerin' plenty, at a gallop. Jess Taylor, he lugs out a gun an' cracks holes in th' tent top, yellin' like a Comanche what's jest drawed his monthly beef.

Beaver Dick, he made his bronc pitch like all hell, got under one o' them hangin' rope ladders leadin' up tuh a trapese platform, grabbed it an' went clawin' up fast, reached th' li'l platform an' started hand over hand out over space, follerin' a young gal in pink tights what war doin' a sorta tight-rope act.

She stopped, looked back, seen 'im a-comin', suddenly sat down on th' cable an', grippin' it with both hands, sat starin' at 'im wild-eyed. He waved a hand at her an' kept goin'.

"Sit tight, gal," he yelled. "I'll save yuh in another half second."

Down below, that High Hat hombre war a-yellin' tuh his cirkus hands tuh mob up an' clean us outa there. That sorta got our goat. We war jest tryin' tuh pep up th' show, free o' charge. Joe Nelson, he romps 'longside that guy, makes his rope sizzle through th' air, an' jerks th' loop taut 'round th' owner's beefy neck, then sits tight.

The Crowd Was Yellin'

"Mar these festivities, suh," Joe says in that stern way he uses sometimes, "an range law'll have tuh take its course with yuh." I starts rompin' to'ards that ringmaster like a bat outa hell, poked my gun ag'in his ribs, tosses off Joe Nelson's rope an' shouts stern clost tuh that owner's left ear:

"Hangin's too good fer yuh, suh. Why'd yuh put that gal up there on that durned rope? We don't treat gals thataway yere in Sawtooth, not no time. Good we got yere in time or she might fall an' be dead." The crowd was yellin' fer action, 'course.

Facin' th' Music

By that time, Jess Taylor's gun war empty an' he'd skeedooed outa th' tent afore anybody could ketch 'im, playin' safe thataway an' leavin' th' rest uv us tuh hold th' stick, durn 'im.

Beaver Dick, up on th' rope, lost his grip an' went tumblin' down intuh th' big net. The crowd screams God-awful, but I

(Continued on page 126)

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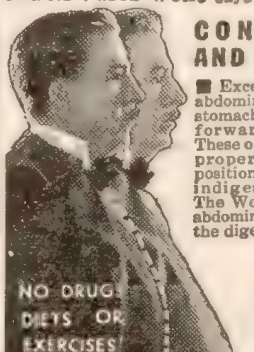

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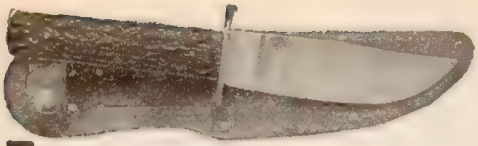

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(Continued from page 125)

hadda laff as I watched 'im crawl outa that durned net, his spurs ketchin' in ev'ry hole they war in it.

He hit th' arena runnin', forked his nag an' follered Jess Taylor, leavin' me all alone tuh face th' comin' mob o' cirkus hands. I looks 'round fer Dude Chaney, feelin' he wouldn't leave a pal in danger—an' durned ef Dude warn't cuttin' up his old tricks when gals is around. Him an' th' purtiest gal sittin' with Billy Connell war ridin' outa th' other end o' th' tent, her mounted up behind him on his bronc!

Th' Fun's Over

But they's allers at least one brave man present at a time like that, seems like. Jest as that ringmaster an' his gang gits sorta clost tuh my hind laigs as I'm runnin' for my hoss, Billy Connell comes bustin' up, a six-gun in one hand, an' brings that gang tuh a slidin' halt pronto. He glares at that ringmaster like a rattler on th' prod.

"Th' fun's over, hombre," he tells that High Hat. "Call off yore gang or I'll pack 'em with hard biscuits they cain't chaw."

That shore stopped 'em. Th' owner jerks out a big roll o' bills, claws off five real five-dollar bills, pokes 'em at Billy Connell an' says tuh pay an extra five tuh our half-paid pals an' tuh tell us fellas all tuh keep away from his cirkus complete.

One Swell Baile

Outside, we finds Dude Chaney, Beaver Dick, Jess Taylor, Joe Nelson all surroundin' Billy Connell's new gals an' vowin' ain't th' man ever made what kin hurt a single one of 'em. Billy puts each of us in charge of a gal an' leads us intuh his restaurant, orders th' best meal th' house kin sit up, pays our boys them extra fives, an' makes us promise we won't go back tuh that cirkus a-tall; tuh which, him bein' so durned square, we all agrees.

We takes them gals out tuh Billy's dude ranch, all a-ridin' in buckboards, an' has one swell baile here, givin' Billy's guests a good sight o' how cowmen kin shake a hoof on a greased floor, drunk or sober, an' be gentlemen under all circumstances. We didn't have tuh put nobody tuh bed 'cept Beaver Dick.

He never could stand his liquor, darn 'im.

A Dandy Crowd

Yes, suh, folks, crowds is swell an' excitin', an' that's why I shore love seein' so many of yuh 'round this ol' HITCHIN' POST this evenin'. Hope they'll even be more, come next month. But ain't ev'rybody what kin find a dandy crowd like our RANGE RIDERS' CLUB, or any other crowd half as good.

They's others what lives sorta lonely lives, wantin' tuh be in but not quite knowin th' way tuh a right happy gatherin'. An' so jest read one o' these fine letters what's comin' in so fast each mail. Ain't got space

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tuh give yuh but one, this time, but more later.

Clay Allison

From Johnny Walters, o' Chicago. Johnny asks about who was Clay Allison. Well, it war thisaway, Johnny. He war born in Tennessee, traveled west and wound up on th' range in th' old wild days o' th' cow-country, a six-gun expert and a man whose history on the frontier is writ for all time. Early in life he accidentally shot his own foot and lived as a cripple. But this did not seem to prevent him from bein' all man, an expert bronc-peeler and a terrific consumer of red-eye—with the natural results. A killer.

As a Southern spy during the Civil War, he was captured, sentenced to death, escaped by killin' his two guards. Next he appears in the early Seventies, on the Washita River in Oklahoma — a gunman, but his biographers all says this: "Clay Allison never killed a man who didn't deserve killin'."

He killed outlaws, rustlers, who stole his stock. Once a dentist pulled the wrong tooth, so Clay pulled out four of the dentist's, then got drunk and shot up the town of Las Vegas.

In Canadian, Texas, at a baile, a sheriff shot Clay's brother John in the arm; Clay promptly killed the sheriff, was tried and acquitted. A ruffian named Chalk, in Cimmaron City, challenged Clay, drew his gun and fired. Clay dropped him with his first shot. Three men once tackled 'im, beat him up badly, kickin' him insensible, then rode away, clear to Montana.

Became a Rancher

Allison, after recovering, rode up there —hundreds of miles, located two o' the men and killed both, in a straight-out gunfight. After many thrillin' experiences, Allison settled down, married, had a child and lived a rancher's life. The child was horribly deformed, but Allison loved the child intensely, cared for it tenderly. He

(Concluded on page 128)

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(Concluded from page 127)

quit his wild life, stopped drinkin', all for love o' that little crippled human being. He became rich. Some years ago, while drivin' a wagon, a wheel came off, Allison was thrown to th' ground and his neck broken. His western fame was high.

Well, folks, come on in and join our RANGE RIDERS' CLUB and git usin' our SWAP COUNTER, open tuh ev'body an' plenty excitement fer all, in doin' it. A swap allers has a grand kick in it, folks.

A Rip-Snortin' Rodeo

An' keep holdin' yore hand over yore eyes ag'in th' desert sun, watchin' fer our next issue, what's gonna be a shore RIP-SNORTIN' RODEO o' top-hands. Yo're gonna read HELLFIRE TRAIL, a novel, by Forbes Parkhill, an' WIRE TROUBLE a Dogie Dean novelette, by J. Allan Dunn, what jest ain't no better two pen-slingers top o' this ol' earth; an' then plenty more by Syl MacDowell an' Bruce Douglas an' Grant Taylor an' even then a lot more jest as good.

An' I'll be waitin' yere at th' HITCHIN' RAIL when yuh comes rompin' up next month—shore thing. Until then, folks, I'm gonna be plumb lonesome, waitin'.

Buck Benson

DOUBLE TROUBLE

(Continued from page 87)

All that keeps me from gittin' ventilated is that I makes a high dive an' grabs that danged bed on the end o' Pablo's rope. After which I goes skootin' out through the brush, floppin' up an' down worse'n a fish on the end of a line. After we strings blankets an' soogans f'r about a mile an' a half, li'l Pablo, he slows up.

"*Por Dios!* Johnnee, we have ee-scape."

"Yeah," I says, groggy, standin' up an' kickin' a couple o' blankets off'n my spurs, "an' we keeps right on 'scapin'."

"An' Johnnee," yips that li'l coot, leadin' a hoss outa the brush, "I have find thee saddles of One-Ton an' Stevie." An' danged if he ain't.

An' me, I forks one o' them hosses which I bought, after which me an' Pablo, we hightails it back to the Hooker ranch. I reckon mebbe it's jest one o' them co-incedences which keeps all them young hosses stam-

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pedin' right along in front o' me an' Pablo till they lands in Canyon Lobo. Which I reckon is all right an' proper, seein' as how I got a bill o' sale signed up legal.

Jest the same, the next wu'thless cowpoke what goes to hazin' a lot o' them li'l troubles 'round till they gits all cross-bred with a lot o' danged di-lemys an' emergencies, it's right then I whams him 'tween the horns so danged hard I peels a dewlap down over both eyes so far, we has to lead 'im to water.

THE GATES OF DOOM

(Concluded from page 121)

of the sprawled Flood, his own gun menacing. Two minutes later, the outlaw, glowering helplessly, was securely trussed.

"And tomorrow, yuh start back to the pen—where, this time, I reckon likely they'll have sense enough to hang yuh for killin' that guard when yuh escaped." Madden said dryly. "Yuh was plenty smart—only you plumb underestimated Bigfoot. That is a right smart calf. Right smart."

Out of the trap, still mindful of the possibly lurking coyote, Bigfoot had stopped. Madden could see him a dim blotch in the gloom. Not a difficult shot, if he wanted to take back veal to the ranchhouse on the morrow. Instead, chuckling, he holstered his gun again.

"You'n me's pardners, Bigfoot," he said softly. "What Hanihan'll think, I dunno—nor care. Mebbe yuh will starve, or be coyote bait, a winter like this—but, yuh danged little tike, yuh sure won't be vealed, not if I can help it."

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 39

1. Sam Houston, hero of the Texan struggle for independence.

2. Martha Jane Canary is the real name of Calamity Jane. She was an Indian fighter, cattle puncher and guide.

3. The settlers of this territory gave the name of Arkansas to the land granted by Congress in 1808 in honor of the Indians who had first lived there.

4. Rain-in-the-Face was the young leader of the Sioux Indians who lead the charge against Custer. He was noted for his fearlessness and cruelty.

5. The names given to the wild horses of the Southwest are: Bunchgrassers, Fuzzies, Broomtails, Bangtails, Shavetails and Broomies.

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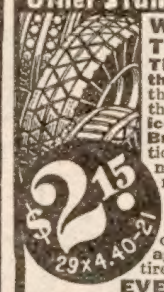

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5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
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31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
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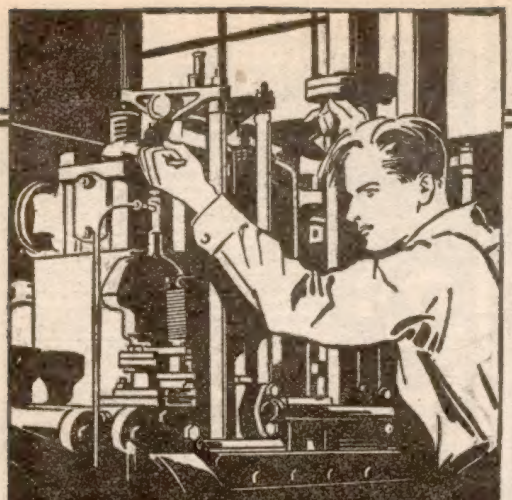

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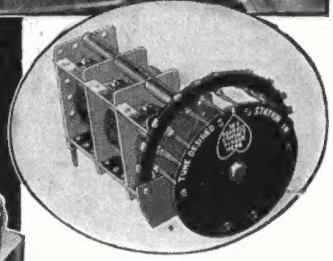

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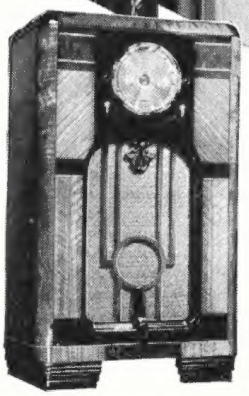

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